

Death in Deep Autumn: Zen in the Art of Dying or Final Despair?

芭蕉の“秋深き”の死：
禅の心か最終の絶望か

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キーワード

[芭蕉] Basho · [俳句] Haiku · [禅] Zen · [秋深き] Deep Autumn · [死] Death

秋深き	隣は	何を	する人ぞ
aki fukaki	tonari wa	nani o	suru hito zo
autumn deep	neighbor	what	to do person?

deep autumn

what does my neighbor do?

(All haiku translations are by the writer unless otherwise attributed)

Basho wrote this haiku two weeks before his death as he lay suffering from a relentlessly worsening, and by all accounts acutely painful, intestinal ailment.¹ While it is not Basho's final "death haiku," (*jisei no ku*, 辞世の句) many literary critics believe that this poem reveals his attitude toward his impending death. However, as is the case with many of his subtle, ambiguous, and highly suggestive poems, there is no unified field of agreement about just what that attitude is. In fact, the legion of Zen masters, scholars, and poets who have ventured interpretations of Basho's mental and emotional disposition toward his rapidly waning mortality are divided into two basic camps presenting a dichotomy of virtually antithetical views of this haiku. It is the goal of this paper to analyze these varied interpretations and explore what possible mindset the great haiku master held as he faced death.

This article will begin with a brief discussion of the significance of biographical information in analyzing this haiku and an explanation of how this *aki fukaki* haiku is a concrete manifestation of Basho's aesthetic theory of "awakening to the high, returning to the low." (*kogokizoku* 高悟帰俗) The focus of attention will then shift to an examination of the pair of antipodal interpretations of

this haiku. For the purposes of this article the first interpretation will be referred to as “Zen in the art of dying,” and the second as “Coming in from the *wabi/sabi* cold.” (*wabi/sabi* is used here in the sense of Basho’s aesthetic and spiritual doctrine connoting an ineffable beauty in loneliness, desolation, asceticism, isolation, and material poverty).

The first critical analysis has Basho facing death in a glow of Zen enlightenment, making no distinction between his small self and the larger collective consciousness of the *sangha*, the Buddhist community, that he shares with his neighbors and all sentient beings.

The second interpretation sees Basho, as he stares into the ineluctable onset of personal extinction, no longer able to sustain the lonely, ascetic, aloof existence he so glorified and in which he seemingly thrived as a man and an artist. In short, he reaches out for human companionship to dispel the loneliness, despair and alienation in which he is increasingly being engulfed.

The exploration of the two primary ways of understanding this haiku will be followed by a selection of translations that provide a cross-section of approaches indicating the difficulty of rendering this “simple” haiku into English and the significantly varied nuances that have been culled from it.

Biographical Necessity?

Before plunging into the duality of interpretation that this haiku evinces, a brief discussion of a crucial question is perhaps necessary: To what extent should a haiku, or any work of literature, stand by itself, and to what extent should the poet’s biographical information enter into the interpretive mix? Should a poem remain independent from its creator’s life experiences, or does a purposeful interdependence of art and artist engender a more multi-faceted literary texture? This is an issue that consistently faces teachers of literature, literary critics, and readers in general. Does, or rather, should, a work of art become more deeply tiered, richly nuanced, or increasingly accessible if the reader is versed in the biographical details of the artist’s life?

This question is perhaps more pertinent when dealing with haiku, given its extreme brevity, subtlety, and suggestiveness where any additional piece of the puzzle might infuse a world of meaning. This debate often arises in discussing another of Basho’s famous haiku:

夏草や	兵どもが	夢の跡
natsu kusa ya	tsuwamonodomo ga	yume no ato
summer grass	warriors	remains of dreams

summer grass
remains
warriors' dreams

This haiku does, to a great extent, speak for itself. The reader understands all that remains of the ambitions of warriors after the battles are fought is rampant summer grass covering the one-time battlefield. However, if the historical and literary resonances of this haiku are perceived in the context of the related episode in Basho's haibun/haiku masterpiece, *Oku no Hosono Michi*, the haiku takes on more profound layers of significance. The reader becomes aware of the emotionally charged scene in which Basho has climbed a hill in the northern Tohoku region to view the battlefield where centuries before a great military leader was defeated. In addition, Basho, moved to tears, quotes the opening couplet of a powerful anti-war poem by Tu Fu, the great Tang Dynasty Chinese poet, and then crafts a haiku echoing Tu Fu's poem.

Is this background material essential to understanding and appreciating this haiku? Or does it diminish the gut-level effect of the haiku itself with a top-heavy dose of intellection and detail?

This aesthetic question very much comes into play when dealing with the *aki fukaki* haiku under discussion. The following interpretation, devoid of any Zen or deathbed philosophizing, is typical of those offered by translators and critics unaware of the conditions under which Basho composed this haiku:

The harvest has been completed, and the outdoor chores in preparation for winter are done. Since there is stillness in the entire neighborhood and no further work, the poet wonders what his industrious farmer friends will do to occupy their time. The self-forgetting poet is interested in the welfare of his neighbors.ⁱⁱ

Such interpretations are reasonable, even moving, when the haiku is approached at poetic face value. In fact, this analysis even hints at the haiku iceberg of implication below the surface, but assuredly, when Basho's proximity to death, his Zen training, and his life of solitary wandering are taken into account, the impact of the poem increases dramatically.

For the purposes of this essay, it will be assumed that a familiarity with Basho's life adds a deeper strain of significance to this haiku. There is, of course, the danger of being accused of idol worship, but there is arguably as much interest in the way Basho lived his life, as there is in the artistic attainments of that life. Therefore, this essay will view the haiku in question as a philosophical bridge between Basho's waning existence and waxing extinction.

Personal Element

At the risk of interjecting an overly subjective element into what conventional wisdom asserts should be an objective literary essay, this writer would like to state that the theme of how one faces death holds a melancholy personal fascination. As my father lay dying in the final throes of liver cancer, my mother tearfully reiterated her deep love for him. With a burst of energy that we didn't know he still could muster from his morphine-induced haze, he answered angrily, "A lot of good it does me now!" My mother, sister and I were stunned, profoundly saddened.

His words echoed across my mind frequently. I was disappointed at his harsh denunciation of my mother's heartfelt profession of her love that had spanned six decades, and disillusioned by his seeming lack of grace in facing death.

However, this stern judgment has gradually diminished over the years, to be replaced by the notion that only when reaching that ultimate moment can one know how he or she will respond. Thus, this essay has been engendered by both academic and personal considerations.

Awakening to the High, Returning to the Low

Before examining the two major interpretations of the *aki fukaki* haiku, a brief discussion is needed concerning Basho's powerful juxtaposition of two radically different modes of diction within the brief confines of this single haiku. Basho's way of haiku, most notably in his twilight years, emphasized "awakening to the high, returning to the low."ⁱⁱⁱ Haruo Shirane, Stanford University Professor of Japanese Literature, defines this poetic doctrine as:

...attaining the spiritual, artistic, or poetic heights achieved by the ancients, while returning to the everyday languages and worlds of the present—a movement reflected in the notion of "the unchanging and the ever-changing."^{iv}

With its sudden shift of diction in the second line, this haiku achieves the stated poetic goal of "returning to the low." It is rare that a work of art reflects a theoretical artistic principle so naturally and effectively.

The opening five-syllable burst, *aki fukaki*, literally "autumn deep," is a "high" poetic utterance replete with the accumulated *wabi/sabi*, *mono no aware* resonances found in the *waka* and *nagauta* of such Japanese classic verse collections as the *Manyoshu* and the *Kokinshu*. In formulating his vision of what haiku should encompass, Basho did not reject the rarefied subjects and expression of lofty poetic sentiment that had been the mainstay of Japanese verse prior to his haiku revolution. He did, however, want to greatly broaden the parameters of the haiku domain to include subjects, language, and everyday experiences that had previously been precluded from

the classical canon of Japanese prosody. In the haiku of Basho and his disciples we meet beggars and madmen; read of bodily functions of men and animals; and in general witness the hum and buzz of people and experience from all walks of life.

After the opening five-syllable classical poetic utterance suggesting the end of autumn and the inexorable onset of winter's disintegration and death, the following seven-syllable and five-syllable parts represent a down-to-earth colloquial inquiry about the circumstances of his neighbor: 隣は何をする人ぞ, *tonari wa nani o suru hito zo*—a return to the “low.” The reader is taken on a brief but impactful literary rollercoaster that tends to highlight Basho's sudden focus on his neighbor. The opening phrase suggests a journey on the wings of high poesy but our expectations are suddenly brought earthward by the poet's musings on his neighbor's situation. Thus, the juxtaposition of these dissimilar elements of diction serves to highlight the message encoded in the terse haiku medium and place greater emphasis on the significance of Basho's neighbor.

Watershed in Basho's Work

Beyond the significance of the particular haiku in question, the artistic process in play represents a watershed in Basho's work in general. His aim in his last years was to present “object and self as one”^v and in this haiku the deep autumn, which serves as an awakening to the high, “functions both as the external scene and as an implicit metaphor for the internal state of the speaker, who is in the late autumn of his life.”^{vi} The returning to the low is manifested in Basho's colloquial inquiry into his neighbor's situation. To conclude this point I would like to take the liberty of quoting Prof. Shirane, who eloquently sums up this essential doctrine of Basho's final poetics:

The hokku, like many others by Basho, embodies not only this double movement, which joins nature and the human, the external and the internal, the spiritual and the mundane, classical diction...and highly colloquial language...but the arc of “Basho style,” which began by “awakening to the high,” by exploring classical, medieval, and Chinese poetics, and which, in Basho's last years, “returned to the low,” to the exploration of various aspects of Tokugawa commoner life and language.^{vii}

With Basho's device of disparate diction in mind, let us now examine just what significance Basho might have intended by shining this haiku spotlight on his neighbor, especially considering that his own death was rapidly approaching.

Zen in the Art of Dying

The interpretation of this haiku by Robert Aitken, the distinguished American Zen master, is typical of those who hold Basho to be an enlightened Zen practitioner. Aitken sees this haiku as an expression of Basho's “deep feeling for the *sangha*,”^{viii} the Buddhist community. “In the

loneliest circumstance the human spirit can experience,” Aitken asserts, “Basho’s mind goes out to his neighbor, and almost artlessly he sets forth a poem on this movement of his mind.”^x

This line of interpretation insists that Basho’s sense of Buddhist compassion for all sentient beings, even as he faced his imminent demise, was so strong that he remained concerned about the well-being of his neighbor, so much so “that even pain and the isolation forced by his illness did not turn his energy to his small self.”^x

Aitken concludes with an assessment of this haiku as the poetic manifestation of one of Zen’s deepest intuitive truths:

Religion and poetry are associated with the inner life, but that should not mean self-preoccupation. In Zen we learn that inside and outside are not two, and Basho’s inquiry about his neighbor reveals his acute awareness of this fact, undiminished and vital in spite of his circumstances...his mind was not disrupted, and if this poem is any indication, surely he maintained his intimate relation with all things into death itself.^{xi}

Illusion of Duality

R. H. Blyth, not unsurprisingly considering his key role in introducing haiku and Zen to the Western world, concurs with the Zen interpretation of this haiku and credits Basho with a sincere concern for his neighbor. Basho’s hope is that his fellow man, as well as he himself, can fulfill his Buddha nature potential as a human being, and refrain from drifting into the illusion of a duality of existence:

Basho is lying in bed ill, death not far away. Suddenly the silence becomes unbearably profound, and he thinks, with nothing to prompt it, with no apparent reason, of his neighbour. What is he living for? What is he living by? Is he really alive? Is he too living in that spiritual world...but also and only, no more and no less, this material world?^{xii}

According to this view of the haiku, Basho remains steadfast, even as he lay dying, in his compassion for “the other.” He refuses to panic and undergo any egocentric deathbed conversion, sustaining trust in the primal force of nature that permeated his life and art. As Basho faces his own death, he is concerned about how his neighbor, i.e., Everyman in the brotherhood of the *sangha*, is living his life, and how that neighbor will eventually handle his own death.

A number of critics take the Zen interpretation of this haiku a step further and place Basho in the pantheon of liberated sages who wander free and easy, like one of Chuang Tzu’s soaring Taoist masters, unfettered by earthly attachment. The commentary of Miyamoto Saburo (1911-1981), distinguished professor of Japanese literature and Basho scholar, suggests the thrust of such

interpretive leanings : “The solitude of the poet, confronted with death, [who] has freed himself from the bounds of body and mind, pervades this poem and expands beyond it into the uncharted vastness of eternity.”^{xiii}

Miyamori Asataro, noted haiku poet, translator, and scholar, sums up the significance of this haiku in certain literary circles when he asserts “some commentators consider this verse a mystic, profound piece revealing the depths of the poet’s soul.”^{xiv}

Coming in From the *Wabi/Sabi* Cold

As opposed to these highly esoteric views that tend to view Basho in a hagiographical light, a second interpretation of this haiku brings Basho down to earth with a thud. It sees the haiku master coming in from the *wabi/sabi* cold of his wandering ascetic life to avoid the despair of dying alone. He seeks human companionship and bemoans the gulf of apathy that separates men.

Tokai Donto (b. 1704), haiku poet and author of the pioneering study of 654 of Basho’s haiku, *Basho kukai* (Notes on Basho’s *hokku*, 1769)^{xv} speaks for many of the early critics who interpreted the haiku in this vein as he asserts, “The loneliness of late autumn was too much for the poet to bear....The hokku suggests the poet’s life growing lonelier with deepening autumn.”^{xvi}

Shirane concurs as he sees Basho fallen victim to a profound loneliness associated with both the late autumn of the year and the late autumn of his life, prompting the poet to reach out to his neighbor “whom he does not see or know.”^{xvii}

The questions of the speaker—Who is the person next door? What does that person do? How does that person make a living? —suggest the loneliness and isolation of the individual, of a traveler implicitly seeking out companionship, or the loneliness of those who live together and yet apart in urban society; or more broadly, the loneliness of life itself, particularly in one’s last years—a loneliness that resonates with late autumn.^{xviii}

In earlier stages of his life and travels, and in the haiku reflecting these, Basho seemed to relish, and revel in, the loneliness that came along with the artistic territory. He was following in the gloriously lonely footsteps of Tu Fu and Li Po in Tang China, and Saigyō, the Heian Era waka poet whom Basho so venerated. But if this interpretation of the haiku is deemed credible, the psychological armor that helped Basho luxuriate in a romantic loneliness is disintegrating, leaving him vulnerable to the insidious onslaught of the loneliness of life’s endgame. As Donald Keene states, “In his lonely lodgings the poet is cut off from his neighbor whose presence he shares but has never seen, and feels a yearning for human company.”^{xix}

Last Phase: 1692-94

Makoto Ueda, considered by many to be the doyen of Basho studies, suggests that the loneliness expressed in this haiku is not limited to the period directly preceding Basho's death, but pervades what he calls Basho's "Last Phase: 1692-94."^{xx} Basho, who had lived in various settings fostering intimate communion with nature in the mountains of Shiga Prefecture and on the outskirts of Kyoto, moved back to Edo in 1691.^{xxi} Ueda asserts that the previous close contact with nature "helped to dissolve his loneliness" but this "could seldom be attained in the hustle and bustle of urban life."^{xxii} Ueda goes on to insist "it is no wonder that some of the haiku of this period show bitterness, frustration, and even despair to an unusual degree."^{xxiii}

Ueda views the *aki fukaki* haiku as the consummation of a trilogy of autumnal haiku of this last period that "reflect such loneliness, not of the kind that brings man closer to the heart of nature, but the kind that deepens his feelings of alienation."^{xxiv} The first haiku of the three "expresses bitter frustration with the lack of communication among individuals."^{xxv}

物言へば唇寒し秋の風

Mono ieba

words spoken

Kuchibiru samushi

turn lips cold-

Aki no kaze

the autumn wind

The loneliness in the second haiku is evident, and engenders even further pathos when considering "...this was written when Basho was at the peak of his fame, surrounded by countless followers."^{xxvi}

此の道や行く人なしに秋の暮

Kono michi ya

along this road

Yuku hito nashi ni

no one goes

Aki no kure

autumn dusk

Ueda concludes with the *aki fukaki* haiku (His English version will appear in the translation section that follows) and offers the following commentary that articulately summarizes the second interpretation of this haiku:

Again Basho laments the isolation of the individual. Even next door neighbors do not know each other; their lives are completely separate. If a person does not even know what his next door neighbor does for a living, how can he be expected to understand people's inner thoughts.^{xxvii}

While Prof. Ueda considers this haiku to be part of the matrix of emotion pervading Basho's final

period, there can be no doubt that an awareness of his proximity to death intensified these feelings. Basho, according to this interpretation, was craving communication and communion with the brotherhood of man as an antidote to the gathering alienation and loneliness. Nearing the end of his life, he wanted to come in from the *wabi/sabi* cold and bask in the solace and warmth of his neighbor's fire.

After composing this haiku, Basho's health precipitously declined and he had to absent himself from the haiku gathering in Osaka for which it was composed. About ten days later, surrounded by those disciples who were able to arrive in time, he composed his final haiku.^{xxviii}

旅に病んで夢は枯野をかけめぐる

tabi ni yande

sick on the road

yume wa kareno wo

roaming a withered field

kakemeguru

in dream

Finally, according to Donald Keene, "He refused further nourishment, but lay down quietly to await death."^{xxix} With what attitude did he await death, which was to arrive nearly two days later? Was it with the Zen understanding that life and death are inseparable and that all sentient beings are united in the oversoul of the *sangha*, or was it with an overwhelming sense of the loneliness, despair and isolation inherent in the human condition? The answer perhaps lies in one's interpretation of the *aki fukaki* haiku.

THE TRANSLATIONS

秋深き	隣は何を	する人ぞ	芭蕉 Basho
aki fukaki	tonari wa nani o	suru hito zo	
autumn deep	neighbor what	to do person (?)	

Inevitably haiku loses something in the translation: The more suggestive and ambiguous Japanese must give way to the more concrete and specific English. The breadth and fecundity of meaning inherent in a Chinese character changes into the more constrictive meaning of an English word; by choosing one word for the meaning of a kanji, the variety of nuance is greatly reduced. This largely accounts for the considerable number of English words that appear in the various translations of a particular haiku. An example of this is the catalogue of English words that have been employed to translate 跡、*ato*, in the phrase *yume no ato*, 夢の跡, at the conclusion of Basho's summer grass haiku alluded to the body of this essay:

mark, monument, print, relic, impression, imprint, trace, vision, track, remains, aftermath, trail, site, wake, mark, evidence, ruins.

In the *aki fukaki* haiku under discussion, the chief problem of translation is not deciphering an esoteric term and struggling to select the most linguistically and culturally suitable English equivalent. The problem is rather how to deal with a colloquial interrogative phrase that is deceptively simple: 何をする人ぞ、*nani o suru hito zo*, literally "what to do person?" As can be seen in the following attempts to translate Basho's inquiry about his neighbor, the results offer a cross-section of meanings and nuance. The Japanese phrasing suggests all of the following questions: What does his neighbor do for a living? How does his neighbor live in general? How is his neighbor doing? What is his neighbor doing at the moment? What is he doing with his life? What kind of person is the neighbor? By what belief system does he go about his life?

Another, relatively minor, problem is whether 隣, *tonari*, neighbor, is singular or plural. Some translators assume it refers to a single, particular neighbor, while others opt for the nuance of the community of neighbors in general, or the "universal neighbor."

Finally, it is virtually impossible to capture the classical poetic nuance of 秋深き, *aki fukaki*, without creating what seems like a parody of flowery Victorian prosody. Translators of haiku are always urged to downplay the poetic devices and language of this "zen poetry" or "poetry of no poetry." If one were to choose something like "the deepest of autumn," he or she would no doubt be accused of a very un-haiku like translation.

Perhaps it could be said that this haiku actually gains something in the translation—if one takes the aggregate of versions that follow as one all-encompassing translation by a committee of Zen masters, poets, and scholars.

13 Ways of Looking at Basho's Deep Autumn Neighbor

It is late autumn
I wonder what my neighbors
Will be doing now.

One Hundred Famous Haiku
Daniel C. Buchanan^{xxx}

Autumn deepens—
the man next door, what does he do
for a living?

Basho and His Interpreters
Makoto Ueda^{xxxi}

Deep autumn—
my neighbor,
how does he live, I wonder?

The Essential Haiku
Robert Hass^{xxxii}

Deep autumn;
My neighbor,—
How does he live?

Haiku Volume 3: Summer-Autumn
R. H. Blyth^{xxxiii}

Autumn has deepened:
I wonder what the man next door
Does for a living?

World Within Walls
Donald Keene^{xxxiv}

The autumn's deep—my neighbor, what does he do?

From the Country of Eight Islands
Hiroki Sato and Burton Watson^{xxxv}

Autumn's end—
how does my
neighbor live?

On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho

Lucien Stryk^{xxxvi}

fall deepening in
—how are the neighbors and how
are they making out

Little Enough

Cid Corman^{xxxvii}

The autumn is advanced.
What sort of people can my neighbors be?

Classic Haiku

Asataro Miyamori^{xxxviii}

Autumn deepens
My neighbor—
What does he do?

A Zen Wave

Robert Aitken^{xxxix}

autumn deepening—
my neighbor
how does he live, I wonder?

Traces of Dreams

Haruo Shirane^{xl}

It's late fall.
I wonder how the man
next door lives.

Basho

Robert Bly^{xli}

[The Autumn of Life]
Nearing autumn's close,
my neighbor, now—what is it
that he does?

An Introduction to Haiku

Harold G. Henderson^{xlii}

FOOTNOTES

- i Donald Keene, *World Within Walls: A History of Japanese Literature* Vol. 2, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p.118.
- ii Daniel C. Buchanan, *One Hundred Famous HAIKU*, San Francisco and Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc., 1973, p.90.
- iii Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 277.
- iv Loc. cit. p.277.
- v Ibid., p.278.
- vi Loc. cit. p.278.
- vii Loc. cit. p.278.
- viii Robert Aitken, *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen*, New York: Weatherhill, 1978, p.94.
- ix Loc. cit. p.94.
- x Loc. cit. p.94.
- xi Ibid. p.95.
- xii R H. Blyth, *Haiku Vol. 3 Summer-Autumn*, Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1952, p.336.
- xiii Makoto Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992, p.412.
- xiv Asataro Miyamori, trans. *Classic Haiku: An Anthology by Basho and His Followers*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2002, p.150-51.
- xv Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, p.418.
- xvi Ibid., p.411.
- xvii Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*, p.278.
- xviii Loc. cit., p.278.
- xix Loc. cit., p.278.
- xx Keene, *World Within Walls*, p.119.
- xxi Makoto Ueda, *The Master Haiku Poet Matsuo Basho*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1970, p.60.
- xxii Loc. cit., p.60.
- xxiii Loc. cit., p.60.
- xxiv Ibid. p.61.
- xxv Loc. cit., p.61.
- xxvi Loc. cit., p.61
- xxvii Loc. cit., p.61.
- xxviii Keene, *World Within Walls*, p.119.
- xxix Loc. cit., p.119.
- xxx Buchanan, *One Hundred Famous HAIKU*, p.90.
- xxxi Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, p.411.

- xxxii Robert Hass, ed. *The Essential Haiku*, Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994, p.54.
- xxxiii Blyth, *Haiku* Vol. 3, p.336.
- xxxiv Keene, *World Within Walls*, p.118.
- xxxv Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson, eds. and trans. *From the Country of Eight Islands*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1981, p.289.
- xxxvi Lucien Stryk, trans. *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho*, New York: Viking Penguin, 1985, p.47.
- xxxvii Cid Corman, trans. *Little Enough*, Frankfurt, Kentucky: Gnomon Press, 1991, p.16.
- xxxviii Miyamori, *Classic Haiku*, p.150.
- xxxix Aitken, *A Zen Wave*, p.94.
- xl Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*, p.278.
- xli Robert Bly, trans. *Basho*, San Francisco: Cranium Press, 1972, p.15.
- xlii Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor books, 1958, p.48.