

Aristotle By Billy Collins

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Billy Collins named his poem “Aristotle” because its rhetorical and poetic structure responds to Aristotle’s statement in *Poetics* that a complete whole has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Collins does not merely mention the philosophical principle; he organizes the poem according to it. The three sections are announced directly through phrases such as “This is the beginning” and “This is the middle,” making the structure visible to the reader. The poem then fills each stage with images from life, literature, theater, history, religion, relationships, and death. The original analysis correctly identifies the poem as a commentary on order and chaos. Human beings want life and art to possess a recognizable sequence, yet the events contained within that sequence often become unpredictable and complicated. (Aristotle, 1996; Collins, 1998)

Collins explains the three stages poetically rather than through a strict academic definition. A beginning appears soothing and natural because it is connected with possibility. A middle follows something and is itself followed by something else, so it becomes the place where consequences, decisions, and complications accumulate. An end follows what came before and closes the movement. The poem suggests that a constructive plot should not begin haphazardly but should have an intelligible form. At the same time, Collins’s diverse and sometimes surprising examples show that formal order cannot prevent disorder within experience. (Collins, 1998)

Why the Poem Is Called “Aristotle”

Aristotle’s account of plot gives Collins the basic structure. In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes a whole action as having a beginning that does not necessarily follow another event, a middle that follows something and is followed by something else, and an end that follows what came before but has nothing after it within the completed action. Collins turns this philosophical definition into an imaginative poem. Instead of explaining plot through technical language, he shows what beginnings, middles, and endings feel like. (Aristotle, 1996; Collins, 1998)

The title also creates gentle humor. The reader may expect a formal philosophical poem, but Collins moves rapidly among an egg, a stage curtain, a first move in chess, frustrated people, historical figures, falling leaves, and ordinary objects. The poem honors Aristotle’s idea while demonstrating that poetry can stretch a theoretical principle across many areas of human life. (Collins, 1998)

The Rhetorical Structure

Rhetoric is evident in the clear separation of the poem’s sections. Collins classifies the images according to their place within a plot and gives each part a distinct emotional atmosphere. The

beginning contains hope, simplicity, and open possibility. The middle is crowded and difficult because earlier events have begun to produce consequences. The end becomes quieter and more reflective, moving toward closure, absence, and mortality. (Collins, 1998)

This structure persuades the reader that order matters. Collins does not present a conventional argument with premises and a conclusion, but the organization itself becomes the argument. Readers experience the difference among the stages because the tone and imagery change. The poem therefore uses form rhetorically: it demonstrates the principle it discusses.

The Beginning

The beginning section introduces creation, emergence, and anticipation. Collins refers to the creation of light, which can be connected with the biblical beginning of the world and with the moment when darkness becomes visible experience. He also uses images such as an egg, the first letter of an alphabet, a curtain rising, a first move, and the start of a journey. Each image contains more than what is presently visible. An egg contains future life, a first letter suggests language not yet completed, and a curtain rising promises a performance whose outcome is unknown. (Collins, 1998)

The original essay describes the beginning as soothing and natural. This is convincing because beginnings often appear simpler than later stages. At the start of a relationship, journey, education, or artistic work, possibilities remain open and consequences have not accumulated. The poem's beginning is therefore hopeful, but it is not entirely protected from future loss. Some images contain an early hint that the middle and ending may become difficult.

Possibility and Mystery

The beginning gives only a clue to the mystery of life and to things not yet known. A person beginning a journey cannot see every event that will follow. The climbers studying their map, for example, appear prepared and hopeful, but later information changes the meaning of that scene. Collins shows how endings affect the way people remember beginnings. Once the outcome is known, the first moment appears to contain signs that were invisible at the time. (Collins, 1998)

This retrospective effect is important in storytelling. A writer selects a beginning because it will matter to what follows. In actual life, people do not always know which moment will later appear to have been the true beginning. Collins's confident statement that "this is the beginning" is therefore both orderly and playful. The poet creates a boundary that life itself may not provide so clearly.

The Middle

The middle is the place where “nothing is easy anymore.” This line, emphasized in the original analysis, expresses the emotional change within the poem. The events introduced earlier have had time to unfold, and decisions now create consequences. Collins presents a crowded collection of images involving relationships, frustration, artistic lives, imprisonment, violence, and death. The reader must work harder to connect them, just as a person living through the middle of an experience must interpret several pressures at once. (Collins, 1998)

The middle requires critical thinking and decision-making because there is enough history to limit choice but not enough knowledge to reveal the final outcome. A person cannot return completely to the simplicity of the beginning, yet the end remains uncertain. This is why the middle often feels chaotic. The structure exists, but the experience inside it does not feel orderly.

Order Within Complication

Aristotle emphasized that events in a plot should be connected through probability or necessity. Collins’s poem uses a looser catalogue in which one image does not literally cause the next. Their connection comes from their shared position in the middle. This technique preserves the idea of structure while allowing disorder to remain visible. (Aristotle, 1996; Collins, 1998)

The poem therefore does not claim that human beings can avoid complications simply by arranging life correctly. Order helps people understand experience, but it does not grant complete control. A person can make thoughtful choices and still encounter accident, loss, conflict, or change. Collins’s poem recognizes the human desire for sequence without pretending that sequence makes every event predictable.

The End

The ending section moves toward finality. Collins uses images of punctuation, closure, abandoned objects, mortality, and falling leaves. The original essay correctly identifies the leaves as a comparison with the end of life. Autumn leaves separate from the tree and fall silently, presenting decline as part of a natural cycle. The image is familiar, but Collins places it within a larger structure so that it carries the emotional weight of everything that came before. (Collins, 1998)

The end also involves the writer and the reader. A final period tells the reader that the written sequence has stopped, and closing the book completes the physical act of reading. This makes the ending collaborative. The poet creates the final line, but the reader experiences and accepts the closure. The text can later be reopened, showing that artistic endings are final within one reading while remaining available for repetition.

Life as a Beginning, Middle, and End

The original essay views the poem as a commentary on life, and this remains one of its strongest interpretations. The creation of light suggests coming into existence. The middle represents adulthood, responsibility, frustration, and the complicated consequences of choices. The ending introduces death and the continuing world represented by objects and nature after the individual has gone. (Collins, 1998)

The poem should not be reduced to a rigid equation in which the beginning is childhood, the middle is adulthood, and the end is old age. Human beings experience many smaller beginnings and endings within one life. Relationships, careers, beliefs, journeys, and artistic projects all develop through their own stages. Collins's structure applies because people repeatedly organize experience into sequences, not because every life follows one identical plot.

Order and Chaos

The poem clearly exemplifies both order and chaos. Its three-part design is highly organized, and the repeated announcements make the framework impossible to miss. Inside that framework, however, the images are diverse and sometimes disturbing. Creation stands beside separation, hope beside death, and ordinary objects beside historical and literary allusions. The formal order does not remove the emotional disorder. (Collins, 1998)

This tension may be the poem's central achievement. Human beings create stories because stories make experience intelligible. They select a starting point, identify important developments, and recognize closure. Yet life contains more detail and accident than any narrative can fully organize. Collins respects the need for structure while reminding readers that reality always exceeds the structure.

Literary Techniques

Collins uses catalogue, allusion, repetition, contrast, imagery, and direct statement. The catalogue allows him to move among many examples without constructing one continuous story. Allusions to religion, literature, theater, and historical figures expand the poem's scale. Repetition of the structural announcements creates unity, while contrast changes the emotional tone from hopeful beginning to difficult middle and reflective end. (Collins, 1998)

The poem's informal diction makes its philosophical subject accessible. Collins does not imitate Aristotle's technical vocabulary throughout. He uses ordinary images and a conversational voice. This simplicity encourages readers to enter the poem before recognizing the complexity of its argument.

Rhetoric and Persuasion

The original essay argues that Collins tries to convince readers of the significance of order. He does so indirectly. By arranging the poem successfully into beginning, middle, and end, he allows readers to feel the satisfaction of a recognizable whole. At the same time, the unusual images prevent the structure from becoming mechanical.

The rhetoric also invites self-reflection. Readers may begin thinking about literary plot but end by considering their own lives and choices. The poem moves from artistic form to personal mortality without announcing a formal transition. This makes the philosophical idea emotionally persuasive.

Personal Choices and Experience

The original analysis suggests that the poet provides insight into life experiences shaped by personal choices. The middle section especially supports this reading because decisions made at the beginning have begun to unfold. However, Collins does not claim that every consequence is chosen. Accident, history, and mortality also shape the plot. Human agency exists inside conditions that are not entirely under personal control.

This balanced view makes the poem more realistic. Order can guide choices and prevent some avoidable complications, but it cannot guarantee a painless life. The value of structure lies in helping people understand and respond, not in eliminating uncertainty.

The Reader's Role

The poem stimulates the reader to analyze it as a whole because each section changes the meaning of the others. The hopeful images of the beginning become more fragile after the middle introduces difficulty. The middle's confusion becomes more understandable once the ending establishes closure. Reading therefore resembles remembering a life: later events alter the interpretation of earlier ones.

Different readers may also connect the images with different personal experiences. The poem provides a shared structure but does not dictate one complete meaning. This openness allows a philosophical principle to become personally relevant without losing its formal clarity.

Conclusion

Billy Collins's "Aristotle" is structured through a beginning, middle, and end, directly imitating and expanding Aristotle's principle of a complete plot. The beginning contains hope, simplicity, creation, and possibility. The middle becomes crowded with consequences and expresses the moment when

“nothing is easy anymore.” The ending turns toward closure, falling leaves, abandoned objects, and mortality. Collins uses this arrangement to comment on literature, art, and life. (Aristotle, 1996; Collins, 1998)

The original insight that the poem presents order and chaos together remains essential. Its framework is orderly, but its images reveal that human experience cannot be made perfectly simple. Collins shows why people seek structure: beginnings, middles, and endings help them interpret change. At the same time, the poem acknowledges that choice, accident, suffering, and death complicate every plot. The poem is therefore not merely an illustration of Aristotle. It is a playful and serious meditation on how human beings turn experience into a whole they can understand. (Collins, 1998)

Work Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics, 1996.

Collins, Billy. “Aristotle.” *Picnic, Lightning*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.