

In the American Grain Study Guide

In the American Grain by William Carlos Williams

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Summary

What is the American identity? What do the words and actions of those who first came to America say about how the nation's identity has been shaped? What is America's history – who writes it and who controls how we see our nation's heroes and villains alike? William Carlos Williams examines these questions in this collection of essays, "In the American Grain", about the first explorers and settlers who put their stamp of identity onto the national character. Williams mainly believes Americans have turned away – as many of the first figures did – from what was good and original about the New World, and in fear and a smallness of imagination have formed an American identity that is inaccurate. Williams includes some unusual and obscure figures – and reveals some colorful opinions of those whose reputations that may need to be reconsidered. His aim is to see even the most tired figures with a fresh eye, and his view of the "American Grain" is surprising and completely original.

In 1925, important artists or writers went to France. America was raw, its cultural life gauche and unsophisticated. William Carlos Williams goes to France, but comes home with a new perspective on the American character. He writes this collection of essays as an indictment and celebration of what it means to be an American, especially an American writer.

Williams includes twenty-one historical figures that have put their indelible stamp on the American psyche. Some are familiar names that need to be better understood. Others are unknown to most. Williams asserts that Americans need to read and study the original writings of these (all except one) men, and he asks the reader to consider his vision that is impressionistic, poetic and soulful.

In essays that are roughly chronological and build on each other in theme and metaphor, the author considers the first explorers and their legacies in the New World. The Spaniards come to plunder and convert; if the total destruction of the indigenous population results, well, they are heathens without souls, anyway. Williams paints both a highly civilized society (Tenochtitlan) and a glorious paradise (the Caribbean Islands and southern America), and in both the spirit of its murdered and enslaved populations is inextricably bound up with the land.

The Puritans are a dried up seed while the Native Americans are a beautiful flower; but the soul-dead shrewdness of the Puritans is essential in order for colonies to be established in New England's primitive forests. Ben Franklin and George Washington, logical offshoots of the Puritan ethic, are drawn with Williams's fresh eye. On the other hand there are those who see in the Native Americans the natural and rightful expression of the New World's soul, Péré Sebastian Rasles and Daniel Boone, for example. And then there are those who have a vision of America's greatness as a political and literary power, like Aaron Burr and Edgar Allen Poe; but their voices are not loud enough or simple enough for their ideas to be accepted.



Williams looks at the original writings and then applies his poetic sensibility and original and unconventional thinking to the question of America's legacy of thought and soul. In essays that vary from straightforward essay style to stream-of-consciousness musings of questionable intent, Williams questions the traditional American assumptions about the nation's collective soul. It is there, he says. It is in the land and in the souls of the first murdered tribes as well as in the violence and close-mindedness of the Puritans, the ineptitude of the pioneers, the despair of Poe, the oppressive anti-sexuality of colonial women. It is there for Americans to find it and build from it a better nation.



Red Eric

Summary

Eric the Red, father to Leif, believes that murder best solves problems like property and ownership disputes. He and his family are repeatedly forced to leave their homes and begin anew somewhere else: banished from Norway, from southern Iceland, from northern Iceland, they land finally in Greenland, a treeless and forbidding place. He calls it Greenland so that people will want to colonize it.

Eric's troubles follow him to Greenland. His son Leif travels back to Norway and brings the Christian religion back with him. Eric refuses to accept Christianity, even though his wife banishes him from her bed.

Eric's daughter, Freydis, is like her father -- fearless, strong and smart, but also ruthless, cunning and not afraid to murder. In Vinland, where she has followed Leif, she kills in cold blood the other leaders of the expedition and their families. Back in Greenland Leif does not punish his sister, but the family never prospers.

Analysis

Eric the Red lives by the old code and resents the civilizing influence of Christianity on the Norse settlements. "What of murder?" he asks. "Either I kill or I am killed." Eric believes in himself and his family. He honors bravery, courage, quick thinking and good seamanship.

The essay on Eric the Red is told in two segments. The first is a monologue in which Eric speaks to a friend, Thorhall, and tells his life story. The second segment switches to third person and narrates the story of Eric's daughter Freydis, of all his children the one who is most like him in her willingness to commit violence and grab power. The essay ends with a prediction from an "I" that is unknown to the reader, predicting "little prosperity" for the offspring of Eric, who is now dead.

Vocabulary

accord, dais-board, pestilence, gall, edict, palisade, aught



The Discovery of the Indies

Summary

This essay consists of the journals and letters of Christopher Columbus with some commentary by the author. Williams begins the essay by personifying the New World as a force that Columbus must reckon with because he has destroyed its seclusion from the relentless onslaught of the Europeans. Williams describes Columbus's first discovery as a "pure, white, wax-like and fragrant" flower, followed by an "acid and poisonous apple." In making this contrast he refers not only to the difference in weather Columbus experiences on his subsequent voyages, but also to what happens to the paradise Columbus reveals when Europeans come to claim it – the destruction and enslavement of indigenous cultures, and their enforced turn to Christianity.

Columbus' journal entries begin with his return to Spain after his first triumphant voyage of discovery. Nothing goes well for Columbus ever again. Terrible storms destroy his ships, force him into his enemies' harbor; he is replaced as governor, thrown into jail and returned to Spain in chains. He appeals to the King and Queen as a penniless and destitute old man who has been unfairly wronged. Interspersed with his journals and appeals, Williams summarizes catastrophe after catastrophe for Columbus, and builds his metaphor of America as an implacable natural entity that Columbus has no power to withstand. He is America's "first victim."

The author turns the chronology around so that the essay ends with Columbus's journal of his first voyage and astonishing discovery. The weather is perfect, the breezes soft, the seas full of delightful fish new to the Europeans. Columbus conveys the wonder and fear of discovery together with the certainty that they will find what they are looking for eventually.

Analysis

Using journal entries, letters to the King and Queen of Spain, and his own commentary, the author contrasts Columbus' first voyage to the New World, marked by beautiful weather and soft breezes, with the last three voyages. Columbus' life goes steadily downhill after that first amazing voyage. The author suggests that America does, too, after its discovery by Europeans. Williams also suggests that "heaven itself," Nature, or possibly even the soul of the American continent turns on Columbus to punish him for opening up such an idyllic land to the violence, greed and lust of European powers. The essay is evenly divided between the account of the first voyage in Columbus' own words, and the accounts of the last three voyages, with Columbus's own words and Williams' commentary. But the last, disappointing voyages are presented first, and the discovery of the New World makes for a powerful ending. Columbus walks as though in Paradise among the trees, "the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

Vocabulary

maritime, predestined, perversely, infatuated, acrid, caravel, gainsay, illusive, archaic, arrogate, avail, temporal, leagues, solicitude, divers, calabash



The Destruction of Tenochtitlan, The Fountain of Eternal Youth, De Soto and the New World, Sir Walter Raleigh

Summary

These four essays tell of four explorers of the Americas in the sixteenth century. In “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan,” the author narrates in a straightforward third-person how Cortez enters the city-state of Tenochtitlan, demands that Montezuma recognize the sovereignty of Spain and the Christian faith, and ultimately destroys the city and most of its inhabitants. Montezuma is elegant, aristocratic, ironic, and centuries more sophisticated than Cortez. Montezuma’s empire is a marvel of engineering, beauty and wealth beyond the European’s imagining. Williams ends this essay, when the proud and noble city and its inhabitants have been utterly destroyed, with the Spanish motto, Viva quien vence! Long live he who conquers! It is an ironic statement because in his conquest, Cortez destroys a unique and astonishing civilization.

In “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” the author tells of Ponce de León from the point of view of the murdered and enslaved inhabitants of the islands who initially welcome the Spanish explorers to the New World. This “We,” described as “not Indians but... men of their world,” know Ponce de León as a tyrant – bloodthirsty, cruel, a man who cares more for his murdered dog than for an entire population of indigenous people. An old slave tells him of a source of water that makes men eternally young. It is her revenge and the revenge of her people – the “We” – to set him off on a mad chase that will eventually kill him. The Yamasses Indians kill him as he lands in Florida on his second trip in pursuit of the fountain of youth.

“De Soto and the New World” is in the form of an exchange between “She,” a mysterious entity who comprises the Indian soul, body, and land, and a more straightforward narration of the facts of de Soto’s exploration into southeast America. “She” is beautiful, desirable, sexual and powerful – but loses all to de Soto. “She” is the native and the land, which are inseparable. De Soto, after four years of looking for gold and the sea, and slaughtering Indians, dies of a fever by the Mississippi River. His men, trying to preserve the lie that de Soto is a god, conceal the death by sinking his body in the river.

In the style of Homeric epic, Williams tells the story of Sir Walter Raleigh who fails as a colonizer but still names the colony of Virginia after Queen Elizabeth I.



Analysis

What is the conquering spirit? Who is the conquered? In these four essays, the author develops his idea of the native spirit or soul that is an organic part of the physical land. This spirit lives on, in spite of rape, torture, enslavement and murder, united with the pillaged land and destroyed cities and villages.

The author explains that Cortez, like Columbus, should not be blamed for the destruction of Tenochtitlan because a larger force than just one man is the cause – “the evil of the whole world.” It is a malicious force that wants to destroy what is new and beautiful, a force as old as man itself. Williams has no kind words for Ponce de León or de Soto and consigns Raleigh to Hell because he sends his son on a mission he knows will kill him.

Who wins in the end – the vicious invaders or the long-suffering Native Americans? In these essays Williams implies that the native narrators are inextricably tied with death. De Soto and Ponce de León die violently and miserably in the New World. Sir Walter Raleigh is beheaded. Only Cortez lives to a relatively old age and dies in Spain.

The Europeans believe that because the Indians are not Christian they have no soul. But the souls of the slaughtered Indians – the voices of “The Fountain of Eternal Youth” and “De Soto and the New World” -- live on in its soil and its legacy of violence that is a part of the American consciousness and identity today.

Vocabulary

orchidean, fortuitous, Cempoalan, interceded, semblance, puissant, maguey, intestine, cacique, bemuse, ensanguined, arquebus, hidalgan, fata morgana, sagacious, fenny, ambushade, pennon, ochre, magnanimous



Voyage of the Mayflower

Summary

William Bradford's "History of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647" is the primary source the author quotes in this essay about the first Puritan voyage to the New World. The Puritans are the first group to come to America and they are the nation's primary legacy. While it is not a legacy to be proud of, their emptiness and their failure of the individual imagination allows them to survive. The author intersperses his comments with Bradford's account of the Mayflower voyage.

Analysis

Williams continues the metaphor of the flower, although it is the lack of flowering that he describes in the Puritan soul. The "orchidean beauty of the new world" described in "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan" has become, in the Puritans, the empty seed, the "particles stripped of wealth." Instead of the flower that is Eden-like that Columbus first observes, the Puritan soul is "a flower sheared away – nothing," and they are "a race incapable of flower."

Because they are so empty and fearful, the shrewd Puritans surrounded themselves with "the jargon of God." They focus their attention on the next world in Heaven, and in this life, on the commonwealth rather than on the individual. This is necessary for survival, but deadly to the spirit.

The land conspires to enforce the Puritan's emptiness of spirit. America's spirit is neither Montezuma's glorious city nor the paradise that Columbus finds, not the courage and openhearted resourcefulness of the Native Americans. Instead, the American legacy is the "pale negative" of the Puritans. The result is America today – lawless, perverted, ungovernable and materialistic.

Vocabulary

zenith, nadir, throve, predicateur, jargon, palisade, redolent, execrations, sordid, malfeasant, bane, staff, despoiled, atavism



The Founding of Quebec

Summary

This essay examines Champlain's actions in settling New France. Champlain is an intrepid explorer, a great cartographer and record keeper, and a man of imagination. The French king gives him the monopoly of the fur trade for three years so he can found New France in what is now Quebec. Basque traders want a part of the fur trade – and Champlain, instead of killing them, makes a deal with them. When later a plot to murder Champlain is uncovered, he sends the guilty men two bottles of wine and invites them to dinner in order to learn their motives.

Analysis

This essay is told from the first person point of view and is conversational in tone. It compares the French to the English in their outlooks on colonization. In contrast to the Puritans, Champlain is the embodiment of French character: civil, intellectually curious, imaginative, a careful record-keeper and thoughtful leader. He is also arrogant. The French believe it will be easy to make their mark on North America, but they do not understand the power of the wilderness, and fail completely because they cannot meet the land on its own terms.

Williams admires the Frenchman but mocks Champlain's inability to understand what will be required if he is to succeed in this unruly and absolutely new place. The land is too big and too inextricably linked with the spirit of slaughtered Native Americans – the "authentic" spirit of the New World.

Vocabulary

temporize, subvert, swoon, fastidious



The May-Pole at Merry Mount

Summary

This essay is the story of Thomas Morton, a colonist at Merry Mount, close neighbor to the Puritans at Plymouth Colony. Morton sees things differently from the Puritans. He barter with the Native Americans using guns and liquor for trades. He enjoys friendly relations with them, especially the Native American women. To celebrate May Day, he erects a Maypole, brews beer, and holds a wild party. The Puritans are scandalized but also want to eliminate a trading rival who has better items to trade (guns and liquor) than they. They arrest Morton and send him back to England for trial.

Analysis

The author uses historical sources to relate Morton's story. Williams continues to examine the Puritan impulse to be ironically shrewd and intolerant at the same time. Unlike Morton, the Puritans are both "trustless of humane experience" and afraid to enjoy whatever gifts their world has to offer – including the sexuality of Native American women. The Puritan response begins to get out of scale. Is it necessary to put Morton in the stocks, to destroy his plantation, and send him back to England for trial, all for having a good time on May Day? "As Morton laid his hands, roughly perhaps but lovingly, upon the flesh of his Indian consorts, so the Puritans laid theirs with malice, with envy, insanely, not only upon him but also...upon the unoffending Quakers." And, of course, upon the women accused of witchcraft at the Salem trials. Williams points the way with this essay to the next one, Cotton Mather's "Wonders of the Invisible World."

Vocabulary

volubly, parochialism, libertine, tippler, debauchee, chaste, wanton, gambol, lasciviousness, consort



Cotton Mather's "Wonders of the Invisible World"

Summary

In this essay, Cotton Mather speaks in sermons and writings excerpted from his collection, "Wonders of the Invisible World." His first sermon lays the background of the present situation: the Puritans willingly leave their homes in England to come to the "squalid, horrid American Desert" because they want to live a pure life on their own terms. But now, half a century later, he says Americans are fallen from those high beginnings. The Devil has come into the midst of the New England plantations and Puritan communities. This land had once belonged to the Devil, and when he sees such God-fearing people settling here, it disturbs him. So the Devil causes a flood of evil-doing (witchcraft) to wash away the vine (the original Puritans) planted by God. Sending witchcraft is the last move of the Devil, and if Americans overcome this, says Mather, they will "enjoy Halcyon Days with all the vultures of Hell trodden at our feet."

He then recounts the testimony at the trials of two witches, Bridget Bishop and Susanna Martin. There is no need to "prove the witchcraft," says Mather, "it being evident and notorious to all beholders." He enumerates the claims, and what emerges is a picture of provincial village life, where deals with farm machinery, land, oxen, cows or pigs go awry and someone gets mad at someone else. These become the basis for highly imaginative accusations: there are blows, fits, people and pigs flying through the air, strange lights, strange sounds, etc.

In the third section of Mather's writings, "Curiosities," he asks:, How do witches do what they do? What makes them invisible? How do they fly through the air? How do they strike people down just by looking at them? It is the Devil imitating the works and miracles of Jesus and the Saints, decides Mather. Witchcraft will not be fully understood until every single witch is destroyed.

Analysis

Like the author, Mather uses a plant metaphor to describe the settlements of the Puritans in New England. God planted the vine in New England soil and the Devil tried to wash it away with a flood of evil-doing. Now, "Degenerate plants" have come up that the "Planters" – the original Puritans – did not foresee.

Williams builds his characterization of the Puritans as the dry seed, empty, and spiritually dead – ironic considering their claims to righteousness and godliness. Now he lets Mather's words speak for themselves, and they are damning words. The Puritans believe that piety and the outward appearance of faith is more important than kindness, tolerance and getting along with other people in the here and now. Their hypocrisy –



supposedly godly churchgoers killing and torturing their neighbors because of an unwillingness to solve a petty problem – is clear to the modern reader.

Vocabulary

evangelical, contentions, posterity, flagitious, apostasies, extirpation, Halcyon, preternatural



Père Sebastian Rasles

Summary

This essay is in the form of a dialog between Williams and Valéry Larbaud, a writer that Williams meets within a six-week trip to France. Larbaud knows the primary source materials of American history better than Williams himself. “But he is a student while I am – the brutal thing itself.” Williams is saying that the French are intellectual and observant, but the American is active and immediate while also uninformed.

Williams believes that the basis for moral and psychic American identity lies in the nation's beginnings – not just the Puritans but the lesser known characters like Père Rasles, Thomas Morton, and especially the Native Americans themselves. “There is a source in America for everything we think and do,” Williams writes. The early records teach the nation's history and morality, and explain American actions today. Williams contends that Americans are “unstudied” – to their own peril.

Larbaud believes the Puritans are admirably strong and vigorous. Yes, responds Williams, but they are little, rigid, uncompromising in their religion, and limited in their living. They “closed the world out” because it – the New World – is too terrifying. They are not sensual. “They dared not think.”

Worst of all, the Puritans refuse to see the Native American for what he is. They only see him as an “unformed Puritan.” Père Rasles is one who does see the Native American clearly. Rasles lived with the Abnaki tribe in Maine for 34 years. Rasles’ conception of the New World, the author says, is compared to the English as “a living flame compared to their dead ash.”

Rasles is a Jesuit priest. The Jesuits, unlike the Puritans, consign the mysteries of religious faith to Heaven and deal with the world of the here and now. Rasles is a positive source for Americans in their search for density, unlike the Puritans' negative source. Rasles has a passion for the Indians that he lives among. In reading his letters one can see how he admires their language, their fighting ability, and the simple way they lived, feasting when there was plenty and going hungry when there was not.

Rasles and the Abnakis are caught between the French who control Canada and the English in New England. The English ultimately kill him in his village as he tries to draw the soldiers away from the women and children.

Analysis

Williams discovers what he believes by talking to the intellectual French man of letters, who has read more but will never feel and act with the decisiveness – whether right or wrong, which is a characteristic of the American. Williams believes that the moral fiber that Americans possess (but are not aware of) has a quality and a cause, both of which



can be found in reading the early writings of American settlers and explorers. It is important to understand and read about all the early settlers and colonizers – and the Native Americans themselves – not just the Puritans. All these contrary influences make up the national character. In just accepting the Puritan story and not the others, Americans today deny their true heritage. They ignore American history at their own peril; but, what is America's history and who makes it?

Vocabulary

cloister, parsimoniously, tawdry, aesthetically, tenet, doctrinaire, austere, limpid, desecrate, sophistry, miasma, perfidy, similitude, Papists, consigned, occluded, proselytizing



The Discovery of Kentucky

Summary

The author believes Daniel Boone's legacy to America has been misunderstood, and the fault lies in the "autobiography" supposedly dictated by Boone to John Filson. Because of Boone's respect and understanding of the Native Americans and his love for the wilderness, Boone is the first white American to create his sense of home right in the country's wilderness, rather than looking with longing back to England.

As a young man, Boone -- only three years younger than George Washington -- learns to hunt and to be comfortable in the wilderness. He marries and settles with his wife in a remote area on the Yadkin River in North Carolina. Years later, when Boone is 36 and settlers have moved in near to his family, he leaves again to explore the wild Kentucky land with five other men.

The other men die or are taken prisoner. Boone and his brother spend the winter in the wilderness, evading Native Americans and living off the land. In May his brother leaves Boone alone and in his element. While continually battling Native Americans, he still has great respect and admiration for them, and they for him.

He returns to this family and, after several months, leaves with a group of settlers to take them to Kentucky. Immediately Native Americans murder his son. This does not change Boone's respect for them. The party turns back, but later Boone is finally able to successfully guide a party of settlers into Kentucky and establish Boonesborough.

Analysis

Daniel Boone is known for settling Kentucky, but his real achievement, according to the author, is that his natural environment was the wilderness. First among white men, Daniel Boone chooses to be alone and unprotected in the wilderness of Kentucky. He creates his sense of home entirely in the New World.

Until Boone, settlers found settlements and establish an outpost of England, defending it against the wilderness and Native Americans. Daniel Boone never feels the need for that, feeling comfortable right where he is. He thinks and acts like an Indian, and in this way he is a new kind of American. As a white man in Kentucky he is more like Columbus landing on Hispaniola than all the other settlers of the young country.

Unlike his fellow settlers, Boone sees the Indians not as completely unlike him, but as "a natural expression of the place, the Indian himself as 'right,' the flower of the world." The flower metaphor that Williams has carried throughout gets its clearest expression in this essay. It is the Native American who is the flower of this New World. Daniel Boone's genius is in acknowledging that and embracing it.

Vocabulary

voluptuary, niggardliness, regeneration, taciturnity, asinine, canebrake, chicanery, ecstatic, sojourn



George Washington, Poor Richard

Summary

Williams sees Washington as a powerful man who does not have powerful ambitions. His ambition was for a quiet and comfortable life. Washington's most valuable character traits are resistance and patience. His emotions are hidden; he is reserved.

Few see the inner man. Washington is the first president of the United States, but Williams asserts, "The presidency could not have meant anything to Washington ... He merely did his duty. He did it with wisdom since he couldn't do it any other way."

Williams quotes from the 1782 Writings of Ben Franklin and then comments on Franklin in his essay titled "Poor Richard," named after one of Franklin's better-known literary characters. Franklin writes to those who would immigrate to the American Republic, and warns them not to assume that success will follow merely because they are skilled, knowledgeable or noble. America has little use for learning or high class. Instead, says Franklin, "... a general happy mediocrity prevails." If you have a skill, you are better off staying in Europe where rich nobility can support skilled workmanship. There is no supporting noble class in America.

Franklin goes on to say that in America, unlike Europe, people do not ask who a man is, but what he can do. If a person is useful, he/she is welcome. Expect to work, and the respect of the citizens and protection of the government is earned.

Franklin urges those considering emigration to read the Constitution and the Articles of Confederation. He says readers will then understand that the American government is not a patron, as in Europe. People must make it on their own. The poor in America – not nearly so poor as the poor in Europe – are busy farming and trying to make their own living. They do not want to work in shops or factories. And, since nobody is too rich or too poor, everybody is working too hard to get into trouble.

Analysis

The essays on George Washington and Benjamin Franklin are written in a more conversational and familiar tone. The author is more formal and respectful of P re Rasles than he is of our national heroes Washington and Franklin. This championing of the unusual and obscure flies in the face of our traditional view of American history. He also devotes more pages to P re Rasles than either Washington or Franklin. His admiration for Washington is qualified: Washington is good at resisting and is prudent, but he lacks energy and initiative. He does not want the presidency and does not imagine anything new or exciting for the country. He is "in a great many ways thoroughly disappointing."



Franklin also gets scant praise from Williams. He has energy, but it is “bulky” and “crude.” He is an American thinker, but “frightened and horribly smug.” Williams asserts that Franklin, like the Puritans, is ruled by fear – fear of the great openness and beauty of the continent. Only the Native Americans and Daniel Boone, the lone white man, see this beauty and power in the natural untamed expanses of the New World and can celebrate it. “Nowhere the open, free assertion save in the Indian.”

Also like the Puritans, Franklin is shrewd. “It is the placing of his enthusiasm that characterizes the man.” Franklin places his enthusiasm in thrift, moderation, shrewdness and protection. These are not the values Williams thinks best exemplify the American moral spirit.

Vocabulary

untractable, encitadeled, wench, tawdry, salubrity, expatriate, accession, artisans, indenture, approbation, forbearance, reconnoiter, tenacity



Battle Between the Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis

Summary

Williams reprints the letter of John Paul Jones, commander of the Bon Homme Richard to Benjamin Franklin. There is no commentary by Williams. Jones's ship, loaned from the French, is named in honor of Benjamin Franklin. Jones is outgunned and outmaneuvered by the British Serapis, but Jones is able to tie his ship to the Serapis and ultimately win the battle. The Bon Homme Richard sinks, however, probably because she has been fired on by the Alliance, another American ship. Still, Jones wins a great naval battle and his feisty refusal to quit makes him a hero to the French and the Americans.

Analysis

The tone of Jones's letter to Franklin is completely self-serving and endearing at the same time, but his courage and skill are undeniable. Jones is the great underdog who will not quit fighting in this historic battle. He endures the insubordination of the captain of the Alliance and exhibits both recklessness and courage in the battle. Williams doesn't comment on this colorful American historical figure.

Vocabulary

brigantine, collier, ballast, pendant, broadside, transoms, censure



Jacataqua, The Virtues of History

Summary

“Jacataqua” is an essay about how the Puritans have had an impact on the sexual mores of modern America. The celebration of pragmatism, of America's industry and wealth comes at the expense of a “beauty of the spirit.” Americans have put “the force of enterprise” between themselves and their desires. The result is an American woman who has no passion. For contrast, Williams tells the story of Jacataqua, the Abenaki chieftess, meeting and instantly falling for Aaron Burr in Maine during the Revolutionary War. Aaron Burr falls for her, too.

The author continues his look at Burr in “The Virtue of History.” This essay is in the form of a dialog between Williams and another person or alter ego who argue about Burr's actions and reputation. Williams champions Burr and argues that history is deceptive. People need to look at the men themselves through their writings and the writings of others about them and make up their own minds. “History follows governments and never men,” says Williams. But “[h]istory must stay open. It is all humanity.”

Burr is a distinguished soldier and an accomplished lawyer who presides as vice-president over the Senate with skill, earning the respect of his colleagues. Still he is mistrusted by Washington and Jefferson, and hated by Alexander Hamilton. “We should suspect the motives of those who malign him,” says Williams.

The duel with Hamilton is fair and more condoned although still illegal in New Jersey. Later Burr is tried for treason, and the case is thrown out of court for lack of evidence. Burr is a free spirit, a man who cares little for public approval but believes passionately in the rights of the individual, including women. His views are controversial and unpopular. Williams asserts that this is why Burr is viewed unfavorably by history.

Analysis

In almost every essay Williams introduces the subject of the next one. In “Jacataqua,” discussing the fearful and barren sexuality of American women, he introduces a contrasting woman, the Abenaki Indian Jacataqua, the fearless leader who falls in love with Aaron Burr.

Aaron Burr, an unconventional thinker, loves women and believes they should be educated and emancipated. He does not care that his opinions are not accepted, whether about women, about the dangers to liberty of the individual, or about other men who have more secure reputations than he did. For this, Williams trusts him and champions him.

In Burr, Williams sees another anti-Puritan, and his life an indictment of the Puritan ethos. Burr does not deny himself. He is original and independent. Williams says of the



way Burr thought and lived, “The world is made to eat, not leave, that the spirit may be full, not empty.”

The author also cautions that Americans need to mistrust the conventional wisdom of history. After the war is won, the conflicts about how to govern began immediately. There is tension between the Federalists (Washington and Hamilton) and those who feel the most important part of the Constitution – the rights of the individual – are threatened by the powers of the government. Burr sees danger in giving away individual rights to ensure the rights of the larger group. He champions the rights of the individual, but his stand is lost in the controversy that surrounds his private life.

Vocabulary

celluloid, inimical, yeomanette, sachem, condoning, boorish, profligate, slatternly, enmity, expedients, admonished, subversive, calumny, provincial, decry, roseate, antithesis, perfunctory, tractable, instanter, condoned, satyr, obliquity, Lothario



Advent of the Slaves, Descent

Summary

In a collection of essays about the “American Grain,” Williams needs to have one about race. In “Advent of Slaves,” the author includes half-clear allusions and half-told anecdotes. The Mayflower is set against the slave ship, and what enables African Americans to succeed on this continent is their appropriation of Christianity for their own uses. Williams draws on his experience as a doctor to freely describe some African Americans he knows.

The title of the next essay, “Descent,” refers to Sam Houston’s life in two worlds. He periodically leaves the white world to live with the Cherokee Indians, This is essential for him to know his character, understand himself, and succeed in the white world.

Analysis

What is the “genius of the place?” It must come from somewhere far below the meaningless filler of everyday life. It is the essence, the “American grain,” and it is vitally important it is uncovered and nurtured. Written in third person but in a stream of consciousness style , “Advent of Slaves” relies on the metaphor of moving down through layers to uncover this genius. Sam Houston does it by going “to the ground,” living among the Indians. Whitman and Poe are only to be understood by acknowledging their deep roots in the American ground. In “Descent” the metaphor of roots marries the flower metaphor that Williams has been carrying throughout. What is important about Houston is that “[h]e wants to have the feet of his understanding on the ground, his ground, the ground, the only ground that he knows, that which is under his feet.”

These essays have a cumulative effect. Williams’s ideas about Poe (coming next) cannot be considered without understanding his conception of Houston. Houston must be seen through the lens of Aaron Burr’s escape West after the duel with Hamilton. Daniel Boone’s genius is most apparent when contrasted to his contemporary George Washington’s prudence and restraint. Burr’s thinking is original and against the grain of conventional thought, like Poe’s.

Vocabulary

loquacious, porgies, ablutions, stratum, tyros, aesthetic, riposte, desideratum, congeries



Edgar Allen Poe and Abraham Lincoln

Summary

The author finds the first truly American writer in Edgar Allen Poe, the first great expression of place, “a genius intimately shaped by his locality and time.” Williams quotes extensively from Poe’s critical writings. Poe wrote criticism on the subject of American writing – and found most of it wanting. Williams urges his readers to read all of Poe’s stories, not just the macabre and famous ones, to get a sense of this original American author. “Poe was unsophisticated,” says the author, and it is necessary for a writer who wants to tear down the presumptions of those writers who borrowed the traditions of English and French literature and called it American because of its subject matter. Poe wants to create an American style from the ground up.

Williams’s one page on Lincoln is impressionistic and obscure. He likens Lincoln to a woman and to a symphony conductor. Williams does not include facts or a thesis so much as his impressions of Lincoln at certain events in his life.

Analysis

The author extends his idea of “genius of place” by claiming that Poe is the first truly original writer in America. He uses two meanings of “original:” first, original because no one writes like him; second, original because his methods come from his origins, his sense of place, and his unique condition of being entirely an American.

Poe, like Boone, has nowhere to go but inward. For Boone that is geographical as well as psychological. For Poe it means that he turns his back on Europe and on cultivated literature. He also turns his back on the clichéd subject matter of the New World – the Native Americans, the wilderness, and the New England colonies. He criticizes Fenimore Cooper and Longfellow for relying on this subject matter while using the conventions of English prose.

What Poe turns to instead is method: “He counsels writers to borrow nothing from the scene, but to put all the weight of effort into the writing. Put aside the grand scene and get to work to express yourself. Method, punctuation, grammar...”

By denying himself the easy out of landscape, clichéd characters and “American” subjects, Poe forces himself into highly imaginative language and situations. Readers should not see the macabre or grotesque plot situations of his most famous stories as what is original and American about him – it is rather his insistence on expression, “to grasp the meaning, to understand, to reduce all things to method, to control.” Poe’s idea of the use of language is new, and American: poetry is of the soul, not of literature, and its aim is to tell the soul. This is “the genius of place,” the truly American character that the author finds in Poe.

Vocabulary

scrupulous, syntactical, prosodic, puerile, anapestic, idiosyncrasy, propensities, morass, nascent, braggadocio, wraiths, inchoate, monomaniacal, collocations, nebulous, diametric, apotheosis, sardonic, truculent, stanchion, inviolate



Important People

Eric the Red (950 – ca. 1003)

Norse founder of Greenland, Eric is banished from Norway and Iceland for murders committed in both places. His son Leif Ericson explores Vinland in about 999.

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506)

Columbus, an Italian explorer who crosses the Atlantic Ocean four times, lands on the island of Hispaniola in on his first voyage in 1492. His voyage is not the first to discover the North American continent, but is the most popularly known.

Hernán Cortes (1485-1547)

Cortes, a Spanish explorer, is responsible for the destruction of the Aztec Empire and the city-state of Tenochtitlan in 1520.

Montezuma (1466-1520)

Montezuma. Aztec emperor, surrenders to Cortez in 1519 and witnesses the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

Ponce de León (1474-1521)

De León, the Spanish explorer who is the first governor of Cuba, leads the first invasion into Florida. He is associated with the legend of the Fountain of Youth.

Hernando de Soto (1496-1542)

De Soto, the first explorer to document the Mississippi River, is a Spanish explorer who tries to find gold and a passage to China in the region of the southeastern United States.

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618)

Raleigh, an English explorer involved in the colonization of Virginia, names the colony for Elizabeth I. He is beheaded for treason by King James I.



Samuel de Champlain (1574-1635)

Champlain, a French explorer, is the first European to explore and describe the Great Lakes. He founds the city of Quebec in 1608.

Thomas Morton (1579-1647)

Morton, the Englishman who colonizes Merrymount in 1627, scandalizes the Puritans by erecting a May Pole and having friendly relations with the Native Americans. He is arrested by the Puritans, thrown in the stocks and sent to England for trial. The Puritans' treatment of Morton is an example of their malicious and unreasoning intolerance.

Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

Cotton Mather, the Massachusetts minister and writer who calls for a return to the values of the native Puritans, is remembered for his writings and for his role in the Salem witch trials.

Père Sebastian Rasles (or Rale) (1657-1724)

Williams cites Père Rasles as an example of the anti-Puritan. The Jesuit priest lives with the Abnaki (or Abenaki) Indians in Acadia (what is now Maine) for thirty-four years. He is killed by the English in his Abnaki village.

Valéry Larbaud (1881-1957)

Valéry Larbaud is a French author and thinker. He meets with Williams and serves as his sounding board in Paris while Williams is writing *In the American Grain*.

Daniel Boone (1734-1820)

Daniel Boone, an American pioneer and explorer, is most famous for his exploration and settlement of Kentucky.

Jacataqua

Jacataqua, a Kennebec Indian chieftess, meets Aaron Burr during Benedict Arnold's march on Quebec in 1775.



Aaron Burr (1756-1836)

Aaron Burr serves as the third Vice-President of the United States, under President Thomas Jefferson. He kills Alexander Hamilton (the first Secretary of the Treasury of the U.S.) in a duel.

Sam Houston (1793-1863)

Sam Houston is instrumental in securing Texas's independence and statehood. He serves as governor of Tennessee and Texas, and Senator of Texas.

Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849)

Edgar Allen Poe -- an American writer of short stories, criticism and poetry -- is famous for his stories of macabre mystery, such as "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Cask of Amontillado," and his poem, "The Raven."



Objects/Places

Greenland

Greenland is settled by Eric the Red. When he returns to Iceland to try to drum up support for his new colony, he deliberately calls it by an appealing name in order to entice people there. In fact, Greenland is much less hospitable than Iceland – it is colder, wetter, and less forested.

Tenochtitlan

Tenochtitlan, the ancient capital of the Aztec Empire, was built on a lake in the middle of what is now Mexico City. At its heyday, Tenochtitlan is one of the largest cities in the world. The beautiful capital is also one of the most advanced in terms of engineering, water systems, trade and general standard of living.

The Mayflower

The Mayflower, a ship, carries the first Puritans to the New World in 1620.

Quebec

Quebec, founded by Champlain in 1608, is a province in east-central Canada.. With its history in the French territory of Acadia, Quebec is today the only officially French-speaking province in Canada.

Merry Mount (roughly 1627)

Merry Mount is the “yearly rendezvous of a rough and lawless class of men,” a colony in Massachusetts close by to Plymouth Colony (now Quincy, Massachusetts.).

The Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis

The Bon Homme Richard is a French ship and the Serapis an English one. The two ships engage in a historic battle in 1779 off the coast of England during the American Revolution. John Paul Jones’s courage under fire (“Sir, I have not yet begun to fight!” he reportedly answers when asked if he wishes to surrender) convinces the French that they are right to back the colonies in their fight for independence from England.

Themes

The Place

The idea of “place” is significant in an understanding of national identity, but maybe more significant in the American identity than in that of some other nations. America will always be the New World and, as such, unformed, unsophisticated, more inclined to action than to thought. Many of its more interesting citizens will suffer for this, because, Williams believes, it is always easier to fit within an established framework than to forge a new path.

America begins as a “savage continent,” and to form it into a nation requires both the empty fierceness of the Puritans and the wild despair of Poe, the very ordinary resourcefulness of Columbus and the nastiness of Red Eric and his daughter Freydis. With these essays, Williams’s aim is to see with new eyes those figures important to American growth – to see them in human and poetic terms.

The American Grain

Williams wants the reader to see the Puritans as they really are – based on original sources, and viewed with fresh eyes (his eyes). He believes today’s American does not see their hypocrisy, their shrewdness, their soul-deadening adherence to the common good. The author suggests this is because the Puritans are the starting point of American history as taught through public school which teaches only the resourcefulness and strength of the Puritans. Williams encourages the reader to examine more background information for an understanding of the whole picture.

Williams says Americans have come from something powerful: “bone, thought and action.” America’s foundations are based on immorality, and only a clear-eyed investigation of the original voices of the exploration and founding of our country will expose that. It is still here – “a kind of mermaid with a corpse for a tail” – but if Americans bring it out into the open, there is hope for them. Otherwise, Williams says Americans are lost in this inward emptiness.

Styles

Structure

There are twenty-one essays, varying in length from one page to twenty-five pages. The length of the essays is directly proportional to the meaning Williams gives to each subject: Columbus, Cotton Mather, Père Sebastian Rasles, Aaron Burr and Edgar Allen Poe are the longest and most meaningful subjects. Lincoln gets one page, Washington, four. The essays are chronological and build on each other in terms of metaphor and meaning. Format varies widely, from straight third-person essay style to impressionistic and stream-of-consciousness obscurities.

Perspective

Tone



Quotes

Now it will be the configuration of a man like Washington, and now a report of the witchcraft trials verbatim, a story of a battle at sea – for the odd note there is in it, a letter by Franklin to prospective emigrants; it has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation. (Epigraph)

There is no need to argue Columbus' special worth. (Discovery of the Indies)

It was the earthward thrust of their logic; blood and earth; the realization of their primal and continuous identity with the ground itself, where everything is fixed in darkness. (The Destruction of the Tenochtitlan)

The dog was steadily gaining on his victim. But, O Soul of the New World, the man had his bow and arrow with him as he swam. (The Fountain of Eternal Youth)

What are they but savages – who know nothing? They wound you, they wound you, and every arrow has upon its barbs a kiss from my lips. (De Soto and the New World)

And it is still the Puritan who keeps his frightened grip upon the throat of the world lest it should prove him – empty. (Voyage of the Mayflower)

It is the weakness of you French – planting a drop of your precious blood in outlandish veins, in the wilderness and fancying that that addition makes them French – that by this the wilderness is converted! (The Founding of Quebec)

...but in this World there is no Happiness perpetual. (Cotton Mather's Wonders of the Invisible World)

We scarcely know that there can be EFFECTS – that anything has a cause. It is of this our moral fiber has been made up in the past – we do not know even that moral fiber HAS a quality that is caused by something, something almost pure tradition. (Père Sebastian Rasles)

There must be a new wedding. But he saw and only he saw the prototype of it all, the native savage. To Boone the Indian was his greatest master. Not for himself surely to be an Indian, though they eagerly sought to adopt him into their tribes, but the reverse: to be himself in a new world, Indianlike. (The Discovery of Kentucky)

Imagine stopping money making. Our whole conception of reality would have to be altered. (Jacataqua)

Facts remain but what is the truth? (The Virtue of History)

Through that stratum of obscurity the acute but frail genius of the place must penetrate. (Descent)



Poe was not 'a fault of nature,' 'a find for French eyes,' ripe but unaccountable, as through our woolyheadedness we've sought to designate him, but a genius intimately shaped by his locality and time. (Edgar Allen Poe)



Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 1

What does Williams refer to in his title, *In the American Grain*?

Topic for Discussion 2

Describe Williams's writing style in *In the American Grain*.

Topic for Discussion 3

Why do you suppose that Williams, a poet on his way to being famous for his poetry, wrote this collection of essays on American history?

Topic for Discussion 4

Why does Williams include Eric the Red as one of his subjects in *In the American Grain*?

Topic for Discussion 5

Discuss Williams's view of the 16th century Spanish explorers. How did they contribute to the "American grain?"

Topic for Discussion 6

Do you agree with Williams' opinion of the place of the Puritans in America's moral identity? How might the Puritans' moral sense be present today in America?

Topic for Discussion 7

Why does Williams seem to be bouncing his ideas off the French? What part did France play in forming America's character? How was French culture important to American writers in the 1920's?

Topic for Discussion 8

What part does religion play in the formation of America's moral character? What is Williams' view of the role that religion plays in America's moral character?



Topic for Discussion 9

Do you agree with Williams' assessment of American authors? What seems to be Poe's criteria? Are there any other American authors besides Poe that you might regard as original Americans? Why?