Overture to a Dance of Locomotives Study Guide

Overture to a Dance of Locomotives by William Carlos Williams

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Introduction

Written at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" remains one of Williams' most intriguing poems, as it signifies a number of different things to various readers. Although the poem did not appear in print until 1921 in his collection of poems *Sour Grapes*, the poem did make an appearance when Williams read it in New York City at the 1917 Independents Exhibition held by the Society of American Artists in the spring of that year.

The occasion of the poem is the hustle and bustle of people, porters, and passenger trains in Pennsylvania Station in New York City. Porters yell train numbers and times, passengers rush to the correct track to get on their trains, and the trains themselves smoke and churn in the station, anxious to put their modernist muscle to work. But rather than represent this scene as chaos, Williams suggests that the landscape before the reader is an artistic landscape, and the station is a kind of museum. His language in describing the station and the throngs of people is sympathetic, artistic, lyrical. He even arrests his narrative about porters and passengers to describe the light filtering through the windows, as if the station is some sort of cathedral to modern industry.

Author Biography

Williams was born on September 17, 1883, in Rutherford, New Jersey, to William George and Raquel Helene Hoheb Williams. From 1897 to 1899, he went to school in Switzerland and Paris but graduated from New York City's Horace Mann High School in 1902. From 1902 to 1906, he attended the school of dentistry and then the school of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. These proved to be important years for young Williams as he later would enjoy a life-long career as a medical doctor. His time at the university proved fruitful for his other career, that of a poet, as this was where he met fellow American poets Ezra Pound and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and fellow Pennsylvania painter Charles Demuth.

In 1909, after interning in New York City, he self-published his first collection of *poems*, adequately titled Poems. For the next few years, Williams lived overseas but returned to marry Florence Helman on December 12, 1912.

Through the influence of Pound, Williams began to enjoy some moderate success with his poetry. Pound persuaded a British press to publish Williams' collection of poems *The Tempers* in 1913, and then in 1914, Pound included Williams' "Postlude" in his collection of Imagist work. An influential approach to poetry advocated by Pound, Imagist poetry tried to evoke an image or picture using as few words and forms as possible. In 1917, Williams' first major book, *Al Que Quiere!*, appeared to critical acclaim. Other collections followed: *Kora in Hell and Improvisations* in 1920, Sour Grapes in 1921, and perhaps his most famous early book *Spring and All* in 1923. In 1925, Williams published what remains an American classic, *In the American Grain.* This book solidified his reputation as a major American literary voice, a reputation galvanized by the 1926 awarding of the Dial Prize for Poetry, Williams' first major award, but not his last.

Between the publication of *Spring and All and In the American Grain,* Williams traveled in Europe and met many great literary figures of the twentieth century, including James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Ford Maddox Ford. Williams' allegiances with painters, writers, and intellectuals would serve him well throughout his life. Williams was also a father by now, having two sons. This was a wildly busy time for him becasue he was raising children, maintaining his medical practice, and writing every day.

Even though Williams was quite prolific, he didn't produce a major literary contribution until 1946 when *Paterson, Book* 1 appeared. This book, a long poem musing over Paterson, New Jersey, would reinvigorate Williams. He would go on to write five Paterson books in all, and, in so doing, he created one of the greatest long poems in American history. Though he suffered a heart attack in 1948, he recovered. In 1950, his *Collected Later Poems appeared, and Paterson, Book 3* won the first National Book Award for Poetry. Williams finally finished the Paterson project in 1958 when book 5 appeared. He died in 1963.

Poem Text

Men with picked voices chant the names
of cities in a huge gallery: promises
that pull through descending stairways
to a deep rumbling.The rubbing feet
of those coming to be carried quicken a
grey pavement into soft light that rocks
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,
across and across from pale
earthcolored walls of bare limestone.Covertly the hands of a great clock
go round and round! Were they to
move quickly and at once the whole
secret would be out and the shuffling
of all ants be done forever.A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing
out at a high window, moves by the clock;
discordant hands straining out from
a center: inevitable postures infinitely
repeated—
two—twofour—twoeight!
Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms.
This way ma'am!
—important not to take
the wrong train!
Lights from the concrete
ceiling hang crooked but—
Poised horizontal
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders
packed with a warm glow—inviting entry—
pull against the hour. But brakes can
hold a fixed posture till—
The whistle!Not twoeight. Not twofour. Two!Gliding windows. Colored cooks sweating
in a small kitchen. Taillights—In time: twofour!
In time: twoeight!—rivers are tunneled; trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively
stationary: rails forever parallel
return on themselves infinitely.
The dance is sure.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The opening lines of the poem might be confusing for some readers, as it seems like Williams is describing a man yelling in a museum. However, upon further reading, it's clear that this is no ordinary museum, though it might still be unclear what exactly the setting of the poem is. One clue might be the fact that the men "with picked voices chant the names of cities." The fact that they are yelling the names of cities might lead the reader to believe that the poem takes place somewhere where travel is done. When one considers that the poem was written in 1916 and 1917, there are very few other locations this poem could have taken place but in a railway station.

The reader might also notice the form of the poem. Early on, the lines are unrhymed, but they find formal use in Williams' tetrameter, a line containing four metrical feet. The first three lines of the opening stanza feature end rhymes, but, overall, the stanza feels less orchestrated and more random.

Some scholars have noted that the opening stanza creates a dark, almost spooky, underground world resembling T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland,* or worse, yet, hell.

Lines 5-10

Williams continues the disturbing description here, noting the "rubbing feet of those coming to be carried." For those readers familiar with Dante's *Inferno,* this passage might sound like Dante's description of the thousands of souls being marched through hell before being carried across the river Styx. But just as it appears the poem will continue on a downward spiral toward something doleful and nefarious, the poet informs us that the feet of the passengers transform the "grey pavement into soft light that rocks to and fro." So rather than the nameless, bodiless feet walking their way into the underworld, these feet magically change the "pale earthcolored walls of bare limestone" into something luminous. This magical transformation might remind readers of some of Williams' other poems like "This Is Just to Say" or "The Red Wheelbarrow" in which ordinary items are transfigured into enchanted objects that reflect the hidden beauty of the world.

Willliams does a fine job of setting the stage of the poem here. Notice how these first two stanzas are rather slow and plodding. The reader is given very little information. Because Williams eases into the poem, the energy of the voices that comes later seems all the more unexpected and wonderful.

Lines 11-15

In this stanza, Williams diverts the gaze of the reader away from the passengers and toward the "great clock" in the station. But just as quickly, the camera of the poem pans down on the masses of bodies shuffling into the terminal, and, again, the poem embraces an infernal landscape. Williams' image of "shuffling ants" being "done forever" predicts lines 60-68 of Eliot's The *Wasteland* in which Eliot, paraphrasing Dante, offers a description of the masses of people flowing over London Bridge. In both poems, the modern industrial landscape seems burdened, darkened by seas of mechanical bodies moving, not in time with their internal clock, but as slaves to the great clock overhead that determines their destinies.

Again, Williams is playing with the notion of an overture here. An overture is the prelude piece of music to an orchestra. Generally, it is slower, more understated than the rest of the composition. Williams is setting the reader up for the crescendo that awaits.

Lines 16-20

The last movement in the overture, stanza four, shifts from describing the shuffling ants of stanza three to a rarified portrait of light in the great station. Here, Williams asks the reader to consider the station itself as art. The "leaning pyramid of sunlight" that streams through the "high window" creates a myriad of associations. First and foremost, Williams implicitly draws subconscious comparisons with Egyptian pyramids and the modern railroad stations, certainly the grand architectural designs of Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Station. Secondly, the image of light filtering through high windows probably makes the reader conjure up images of churches or cathedrals. The pyramid image is a favorite of Williams, also making appearances in the poems "March" and "History." Without question, Williams wants the reader to think of these stations as secular, modern equivalents to the great pyramids of Egypt and the great cathedrals of Europe. In so doing, Williams does sound a bit like a futurist, here, in that he suggests that the triumph of man's ingenuity in the modern era rivals the grace and mystery of past architectural structures.

Additionally, the description of light might recall the reference to a "gallery" in stanza one. Postures that are "indefinitely repeated" might be referring to a museum in which portrait after portrait lines the walls. Whether it is a museum or a modern day cathedral, Williams takes the reader out of the mundane and into an entirely new world.

Lines 21-24

Without warning, without introduction, the methodical rhythm of the overture surges into a cacophony of sounds and shouts. The tetrameter of the first four stanzas gives way to the fragmentation of human voices shouting out numbers, directions, suggestions. Here, the monotony of one voice narrating the poem becomes a symphony of human voices, each creating their own music.

The shift in tone is reflected in the poem's form. The first twenty lines of the poem, though unrhymed, look and sound relatively conventional. Many readers might be used to somber, earnest, poetic descriptions of interior spaces. But all of a sudden, lines like "two-twofour-twoeight!" make their way into this poem. Such fragmentary lines are uncommon in lyric poetry. What might Williams be thinking?

Notice also how the lines suddenly gain some space in between them, as if each is their own stanza. What's more, it seems like the voices of the porters demand their own stanzas, as if they are music themselves. In this sense, Williams is less a futurist and more a humanist. It is finally the human voice and only the human voice that can break the monotony of the overture. Like a symphony itself, the poem makes a wonderful shift from solo to orchestra. In other words, in these stanzas, the poem moves from monologue to dialogue.

Lines 25-26

This brief stanza marks a movement away from the voices in the previous stanzas and a return to the narrator, the omniscient voice, whose mission appears to be one of commentary. Once more, the speaker draws the reader's gaze upward toward the light. It's unclear what Williams' motive is in this stanza, but most likely, he wants the reader to be aware of movement and beauty, both above and below. The obvious action is the people rushing to make their trains, and that dance requires poetic attention. But there is a quieter dance going on; one in the ether of the station—the dance of light. So wonderful is the light that Williams describes it in artistic terms. It "hangs" like a painting that needs to be straightened, and like a painting, it demands and deserves the reader's sense of aesthetics.

This and previous descriptions of light suggest another poetic reference, the pastoral. A pastoral is, traditionally, a short, lyrical poem set in a natural setting. The poet, once he enters the setting, admires the beauty of nature and comes to some sort of realization about himself and the world about him. The repeated references to light in this poem recall hundreds of pastoral poems that laud sunlight sifting through the clouds and illuminating the leaves, the gentle brook, the dewy grass. Williams' poem reads like an anti-pastoral, a modernist version in which a man-made industrial building, not nature, provides insight and beauty.

Lines 27-31

Williams continues the pastoral language in this stanza. He describes the station in decidedly lush and overtly sexual language. Perhaps the most opaque and most complex stanza in the poem, the sexual overtones have raised a number of comments from scholars. One can hardly overlook the erotics of this section, and given their clarity, one begins to go back over the poem to see if equally sexual imagery appears elsewhere.

Perhaps the best way into this section is to pay close attention to the language Williams' employs. He repeatedly depicts the station in feminine terms. In fact, one critic goes so far as to suggest Williams' representation of the station is "womblike." Indeed, Williams describes the light as "soft" and that it "rocks / to and fro." Conversely, the trains, classic phallic symbols, surge into the station, disseminating passengers into the tunnels of the station. However, it would appear that the trains also carry feminine characteristics, as they are "[p]oised horizontal" and possess a "warm glow-inviting entry." Always the iconoclast, Williams turns conventional sexual metaphors and archetypes on their heads here. For him, trains carry both masculine and feminine qualities, like people themselves, and, not surprisingly, like dances. To Williams, the entry and egress of trains and people remind him of human behavior: dances and sex. Thus, not even the most mechanized space can escape the most human of endeavors.

Lines 32-34

This short stanza returns to the dynamism of the trains. The sexuality of the last stanza continues here. The pause and anticipation of the "fixed posture" finds exuberant release in the whistle, an almost climactic discharge of sound and energy. Placing the two-lined stanza almost flush with the right margin in it's own stanza, provocatively recreates the surprise and anticipation of the signal that the train is about to leave the station, that the big machine is about to pull out, en route to another city and another station.

Again, the shouts of the porter are heard, giving a warning to avoid train 28 and train 24, and to go for train 2. This line interrupts the narrative flow of the poem just as the last interjection of voices did. This technique suggests that for Williams, the singular narrative of the poet will give way to the plurality of voices in the station.

Lines 35-38

In this stanza, the poet returns to his position as tour guide. He describes, for the reader, what he sees as the trains depart from the station. He sees windows glide past and African American cooks "sweating in small kitchens." Then, like that, nothing but "Taillights." After all that waiting, after all that anticipation and pent-up energy, the train is gone in seconds. Again the poet's monologue is interrupted by the porters informing the reader that trains "twofour" and "twoeight" will depart in time.

A point of interest in this stanza is Williams' bizarre observation of "colored cooks." One possible reading of this line cites Williams for racism by subtly reminding us that blacks are found sweating in tight kitchens, not as passengers on the trains themselves. This reading would suggest that Williams is both implicitly racist and classist, linking race with menial tasks. No other races or groups of people are mentioned, so why single out African Americans? Yet, another reading of the poem might argue that Williams' inclusion of blacks reveals an egalitarianism, a sense of equality. Very few other poets would have even considered incorporating a black person into their poems, whereas the

only ethnic group warranting mention in Williams' text is African Americans. So an equally persuasive interpretation could argue that Williams is attempting to break down racial barriers in his poem. Most likely, it is a little bit of both.

Lines 39-43

Here, Williams drives home the idea of the modern pastoral. Williams brilliantly compares the underground tunnels, bridges, wheels, and rails to rivers and "oozy swampland." For Williams, manmade landscapes and so-called "natural" landscapes are equally beautiful and equally deserving of poetry. This tendency to link natural beauty with industrial efficacy stands as yet another futuristic characteristic of Williams. Note how nature seems plundered, transcended by technology, as if the great inventions of man triumph over the chaotic and brazen natural world.

The repetitions that seemed lifeless and monotonous at the beginning of the poem now appear not only exciting, but immanent. The promise of returning trains on parallel tracks functions as a constant, a reminder, a marking of the land. The earth will always wear the trace of railroad tracks, an inscription of the covenant between man and industry. Trains will always run. Like the great clock in the station, they are a permanent fixture on society's external and internal landscape.

Line 44

The final stanza in the poem is also the final line: "The dance is sure." The certainty of the railroad system drives home the point of the previous stanza. You can always count on railroads. However, this dance serves as a larger metaphor for America. The sureness of the railroads functions as a metonym, a kind of metaphor or stand-in, for the industrial power that was rebuilding America in the 1910s and 1920s. The promise of reliable travel, of conquering the landscape, of barreling like a train headlong into the glorious future are all ancillary meanings encoded in the final line.

What's more, the last line serves as the final movement in the symphony. The dance, which has taken the reader all over the station and all over the nation, has come to an end. But the reinforcement of this final line suggests a dance, a glorious, powerful dance, in which trains, people, and the modern metropolis all move together, in step, in time.

Themes

Technology and Modern America

The most obvious theme of "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" lies in the poem's affectionate, even jingoistic stance on the promise of technology and an industrialized America. For instance, the title itself is evocative enough. That a poet would think of trains arriving and leaving a large, crowded metropolis in terms of a dance suggest an unflagging appreciation for the wonder of modern transportation and invention. Instead of seeing the trains as ugly, tedious prisons that separate humans from nature, the poet finds them utterly human, engaging in typical human behaviors. Furthermore, Williams seems to suggest that his poem is merely an overture, a prelude for the real artistic experience—the trains. Traditionally, poets and writers would think of their work as art, but, here, Williams wants his poem to function as a mere overture to the more impressive performance.

Without question, futuristic subtexts run beneath the poem like so many subways. Williams' uncritical ode to modern technology seems, on one level, as though it came right out of the Futurist Manifesto. Clearly, Williams sees modern America as teeming with energy, promise, and interaction, just like a train station. For him, technological innovations can offer as much for modern society as poetry, and according to this poem, they can work together to achieve common ends. What interests Williams is the sense of continuity the trains and their stations bring. They are something society can count on, something to look forward to, yet, unlike so much of history, they don't act oppressively. They help. They carry. In this sense, Williams does convert them into a hopeful metaphor for modern American society.

Poetry and the Mundane

More than any other American poet, Williams is best known for his ability to show the poetry in everyday life. In poems like "This Is Just to Say," in which he turns stealing plums into a mystical experience, and "The Red Wheelbarrow," in which he forces the reader to ask how much depends on how the reader sees the world, Williams suggests that the world is what the reader makes of it. His fiercest competitor on this front is Wallace Stevens, whose poems "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Anything is Beautiful if You Say it Is" argue essentially the same thing. But Williams, the only poet daring enough to write an epic poem about Paterson, New Jersey, has made a life's work of forcing his readers to see art in what appears to be artless. In the very same exhibit in which Williams debuted his poem, Marcel Duchamp put on display his most famous and most controversial sculpture—a men's urinal. What Duchamp wanted to argue was that anything could be seen as art. Similarly, Williams would argue that anything, when looked at creatively, could become poetry.

In this poem, Williams enables the reader to see the majesty, the symmetry, and the beauty in a modern-day train station and, believe it or not, in the trains themselves. What is utterly remarkable about the poem is that Williams ultimately suggests that the real poem takes place in the station and on the tracks, not on the page. For him, one must look for poetry in order to find it. To alter how one sees the world is to alter the world.

Poetry and Art

Williams and Stevens are also best known for incorporating art and art theory into their poems. In fact, Williams once wrote an entire cycle of poems on the paintings of Peter Brueghel. While Stevens wanted to incorporate theories of art in his poems, Williams wanted his poems to do on paper what paintings do on canvas. In "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," Williams creates a kind of painting by the way he uses language, typography, and metaphor.

First of all, Williams suggests, in the opening stanza, that the train station is itself a gallery. If that is the case, then the stage is already set to begin looking at items inside the gallery as art. Light caresses the walls, filtering in through the high windows and landing on the columns of the station. Is he describing the Lourve or Pennsylvania Station? It is designed to be unclear. Furthermore, Williams goes to great length to create a visual picture of the stations and the trains within it, as if he were painting a picture with words. Just as painters use light, color, and symbol to evoke emotions and associations so, too, does Williams use symbol, light, and shade to evoke a sense of what the station might look like. But, as is typical with modern art, he doesn't come right out and offer a representational version of reality. He distorts it. Thus, his poem resembles the modernist paintings of Charles Demuth, especially a painting like "End of the Parade," in which a modern industrial landscape reaches to the sky as light slashes across the canvas. Thematically, Williams' poem mirrors Demuth's "Incense of a New Church," whose title and figures suggest that the smoke emanating from a skyline is incense issuing from the new holy place, the modern city. Likewise, Williams suggests in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," that the train station rivals the great cathedrals of old, that it is as sacred to modern societies as churches were to past eras.

Style

Though the poem does not adhere to any conventional poetic form like a sonnet or a villanelle, it does possess a certain form. First of all, the opening stanzas are written in an uneven but effectively droll tetrameter. The lines do not intentionally rhyme, though an occasional end-rhyme sneaks into the poem. However, the steady rhythm of the first four stanzas is radically interrupted by the intrusion of outside voices, the shouts of the railway porters. Here, the lines become jagged and fragmentary, so that the narrative that was originally fairly symmetrical has now become asymmetrical. In keeping with the symphonic metaphor suggested by the title, the poem moves from harmony to discord, from consonance to dissonance. In poetic terms, the poem shifts from monologue to dialogue. The singular lyric voice has to give way to a collage of other voices, all of whom are competing for the reader's attention.

The monotonous rhythms of the opening stanzas, the juxtapositions of the voices, and the intermittent shifts from one voice to many voices and back again are not simply random. In the first few stanzas, the constancy of the beat mirrors the chugchug- chug of the trains. Similarly, the frequent movements from one voice to many resembles the come-and-go movements of the trains rolling in and out of the station. Sounds in a train station are rarely constant; there are always shifts and changes. Williams recreates this sensation through the shifts in his poem.

Not only does Williams use poetic form to recreate the surging and stopping of trains, he also wants to recreate the symphony of sounds in the station. In a train station you hear trains, announcements, dialogue, and music, each overlapping the other. Such is the case in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives." Williams presents various sounds, even if they interrupt the flow of the poem, in an attempt to show that, ultimately, the scene is not one of chaos but one of order, like the poem itself.

Historical Context

"Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" was written at a time of unparalleled cross-fertilization of the arts in both America and Europe. The 1910s were witness to some of the most important innovations in art, music, poetry, business, communication, photography and architecture. In the art world, figures like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque were experimenting with what would become cubism, perhaps the most influential artistic movement of the century. In 1917, the same year Williams read this poem, Marcel Duchamp shocked the art world by exhibiting a men's urinal as a piece of sculpture. In America, artists like Georgia O'Keefe and Charles Demuth began painting large non-representational canvases that attempted to evoke emotions and reactions rather than replicate images. All of these people were transforming art from a kind of passive activity that beautified the world into an active, dynamic gesture that commented on modern society's tendency to disrupt convention and tradition.

Innovations in the arts were not limited to painting and sculpture. Music was also undergoing radical change. In classical music Gustav Mahler introduced assonance and dissonance into contemporary music, suggesting that the harmony and symmetry of the nineteenth century simply would not suffice in the twentieth century. American music put itself on the map through the popularization of jazz. The concept of jazz, that it relied on improvisation, that it did not require formal training, and that it became the purview of African Americans, seemed to symbolize a sea change in American culture. The predictability and conservatism of twentieth-century America was turned on its head by the wide spread acceptance of jazz and the lifestyle such energetic music engendered.

In other art forms, people like Man Ray were revolutionizing the way people took pictures; Charlie Chaplin and Sergei Eisenstein altered how movies were made; and soon, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and James Joyce would alter the way novels would be conceived. But, perhaps, no changes were more dramatic than in the realm of poetry.

In 1916 and 1917, World War I was on everyone's minds. The world had not experienced death and destruction on such a grand scale. In this decade, people were moving from the country to the city; they were travelling by boat and train; they were listening to the radio and watching movies; they were living in large cities and large buildings where they may not know their neighbors; and young men were dying in battle. Poetry, more than any other written form, has always been mimetic, which is to say, it has always mirrored the world in which it was written. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, people saw the world as orderly, symmetrical, harmonious; hence, poetry was harmonious. It rhymed, it found expression in orderly forms like sonnets, villanelles and sestinas.

But after the writings of Darwin and Nietzsche, the horror of the first world war, and the alienating experiences of modern life, the world no longer held the same sense of harmony. So, neither did poetry. Writers like Williams, Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Hart Crane and others began writing a poetry that tried to capture the sense of anguish and angst

of early twentieth century America. Thus, poets like e. e. cummings splayed their lines all over the page; Eliot and Pound resorted to collage; Stevens and Williams exploded traditional notions of form. Poems stopped rhyming. No longer were they written in lofty tones. Order was supplanted by disorder. Nature took a back seat to technology.

As dismal as this may sound, artists and writers saw this time as a glorious opportunity to create a new and exciting art. They believed that finally, art and literature could be wrested from the grasp of the elite and be made available to everyone. Above all, they saw the 1910s and 1920s as a time of innovation. Innovation was the spirit of the age. Ezra Pound's famous dictum, "Make it new" captured the zeitgeist of America and Europe as it entered its third decade. In their poetry, Williams and Wallace Stevens were constantly trying to make things new. They experimented with different forms, they imitated painters (both Stevens and Williams tried to replicate cubism and fauvism), they found inspiration in music, and they saw poetry as a means of social and political commentary.

Williams was friends with a number of poets, painters and musicians, so his work, including "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," reflects his interest in other arts and in the industrial progress of America. For him, the railway station was a symbol for democracy—people coming together, travelling side by side, engaging in a hopeful, artistic dance that may usher them and him into a peaceful and progressive new era.

Critical Overview

"Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" is not one of Williams' better known poems. In fact, most of the authoritative critical studies of Williams either mention the poem only in passing or not at all. Generally, the poem seems to find favor with critics who see it as an example of Williams' zeal for burgeoning American industrialism.

Though neither critic follows up on his claim or offers a reading of the poem, both Peter Halter and Paul Mariani see the poem as endemic of Williams' interest in futurism.

Peter Schmidt probably offers the most thorough reading of the poem. In his study of Williams and other arts, he argues that the poem gains its strength from the shift in tones. According to Schmidt, Williams begins the poem "by writing a monologue in a single mood" but ends the poem "with a suite of contending voices." Schmidt also explores the thinly veiled sexuality in the poem, claiming that Williams links the entry and egress of trains with human sexuality. Ultimately, Schmidt sees the poem as Williams' celebration of the urban world.

Christopher MacGowan picks up on the gallery imagery in the poem and links this imagery with Williams' reading of the poem at the 1917 Independents Exhibition, which took place at the Grand Central Palace in New York, which had been constructed over the renovated Grand Central Station. MacGowan claims that the descriptions of light work like the "interlocking forms of a vorticist painting" that "captures both stillness and energy."

The most unique reading of the poem belongs to Barry Ahearn who claims that the poem unifies two utterly distinct eras. According to Ahearn, the chant of the porters at the beginning of the poem evokes Gregorian chants, especially when one considers the fact that Williams describes the train station as one might describe a cathedral. The second stanza functions as a dual narrative: it could be a description of people making their way to a train or a narrative about "pilgrims making their way through an immense temple."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rader has published widely in the field of twentieth-century poetry. He is chair of the Department of English and Communication Studies at Texas Lutheran University. In the following essay, he looks at Williams' use of synthesis and his connection to Walt Whitman.

Without question, William Carlos Williams is, along with Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound, one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. He gained his reputation through a staggering series of relatively short poems that tend to explore a singular issue or image. Indeed, Williams is often linked to a group of poets called the Imagists, whose mission was to write poetry that did little else but evoke a picture. Pound's famous poem "In a Station at the Metro" lasts only two short lines, but creates a vivid picture of faces emerging from the Paris trains: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet black bough." Williams, known for his short poem "This is Just to Say" and, in particular, the sixteen-word poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," was an admirer and follower of Pound and often applied Imagistic ideals to his poetry. Thus, his poems possess a singular vision, a tight, reductive quality.

This is not the case for "Overture to a Dance of Locomotive." In this poem, Williams embraces a poetics of fusion, as he seems to be working throughout the piece to fuse disparate elements together. Because of his tendency in this poem to connect, or unite, and because of his celebratory tone and manner of depicting crowds of people, Williams sounds much less like Pound or Stevens, here, and much more like a different poetic father—Walt Whitman. By looking at these poetic gestures, it becomes clear that, like a locomotive himself, Williams seems to be departing from a distant station, the nineteenth-century hub of Whitman's poetry.

While Williams' poem does not directly mimic or copy any particular poem by Whitman, his eager, exuberant tone, his desire to unify otherwise unconnected items, and his interest in throngs of people does stem from Whitman. In an early poem from the "Children of Adam" section of *Leaves of Grass* titled "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City," Whitman sees the populated city as an opportunity. Something similar transpires in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,* in which Whitman admires and wonders about the seas of people getting on and off the ferry. For instance, in a poem like "Sparkles from the Wheel," Whitman observes a large crowd of people moving through the city: "Where the city's ceaseless crowd moves on the livelong day, / Withdrawn I join a group of children watching, I pause aside with them." Whitman, always the casual observer, takes a step away from the action and describes to the reader exactly how the masses of people before him form a kind of hub to the larger wheel that is America. Williams performs a similar task in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives." Like Whitman's, Williams' narrator is not among the people scurrying into and out of the train station. He hangs back to observe and to comment. In fact, at one point he refers to the mob below as shuffling ants. But for him the movement of people forward and backward, their incessant rhythms and the pinpoint timing of the trains combines to create a glorious dance, just as for Whitman the people passing him combine to form a giant wheel. In Williams'

poem and in these mentioned of Whitman, both poets are enlivened by the connection between large groups of people and transportation, because both men connect these things with the burgeoning energy and mass of the United States.

One of the great moments in American literature takes place at the beginning of canto XXI of Whitman's *Song of Myself.* Whitman writes:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the
pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter
I translate into a new tongue.
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man.

In this passage, Whitman connects three sets of opposites that have been a profound part of Anglo- American culture since white people arrived in North America in the seventeenth century. Whitman boldly fuses the binarisms, or set of opposites, of body and soul, heaven and hell, and man and woman. Later in the same canto, he offers a convincing yet tender example of his means of reuniting humans with the earth. Thus, for Whitman, opposites only drive a people apart. His poetic mission has always been to unite. Elsewhere in *Song of Myself* he seeks to heal racial separatism, class division, and the unhealed wound between the North and the South.

While Williams' poetic project lacks the overarching vision of Whitman's, in this particular poem, he seems to be channeling the spirit of the great bard, for we find an unusual desire to connect. For example, Williams links the rather monotonous, ambling mob with the energy of the trains, suggesting in the final stanza that the two actually work together to form a kind of erotic relationship and, finally, a dance. Additionally, Williams sees railroad tracks as a viable and useful means of connecting the natural world with the mechanized world: "rivers are tunneled: trestles cross oozy swampland." Moreover, where Whitman seeks to connect details within his poem, Williams opts to link items appearing in the poem with ideas or concepts outside the text. For instance, his description of the railway station in the opening stanzas of the poem makes the station appear transfigured into something wholly otherworldly. According to Barry Ahearn, Williams deliberately draws comparisons between Pennsylvania Station, the great Egyptian pyramids, and European cathedrals. Through this comparison, Williams unites three utterly distinct eras'architectural designs and the purposes behind those designs. Also, in what is perhaps his most Whitmanesque gesture, Williams sees the trains as a uniter of all people, regardless of race, class, and gender. It seems clear that he sees the trains and the station as a metaphor for America—a grand space where people are brought together and bolstered by the promise of industry and innovation. Finally, Williams achieves another kind of unity in the poem that remains uniquely his. While the poem begins in a typically earnest lyric voice, the linear progress is interrupted by the intrusion of a collage of voices. Shouts from porters, warnings from conductors, voices over the loudspeakers, all contend with the persona's narration for the reader's attention. Thus, Williams is able to enact a synthesis of the singular voice outside the poem with the plurality of voices within it.

Both Williams and Whitman tend to write a celebratory poetry. This is particularly unusual given modernism's grave tenor of alienation and suffering. For instance, Eliot's poems are often mournful; Pound's are intellectual and often satirical; Stevens' alternate between giddy and meditative. However, Williams, more than any other modern American poet, opts for the poem of exuberance. In poems like "Danse Russe" and "This is Just to Say," Williams celebrates the simple pleasures in life. In "Danse Russe," the poet describes the luxurious moments when everyone in his family is gone or asleep and he can dance naked, ecstatic, in front of the mirror. Similarly, in "This is Just to Say," the poet walks the reader through the sensuous delights of eating frozen plums that someone else was saving for breakfast. Regarding "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," Williams' celebratory mode turns from the personal to the public. Here he venerates modern American industry and technology. Without a doubt, he sees the trains as symbols of American progress and the stations themselves as their temples. So powerful and full of potential are the trains, they begin to acquire human qualities. Williams describes the trains as "[p]oised horizontal □ / packed with a warm glow—inviting entry." Peter Schmidt has commented on the implicit sexuality of these lines, but more importantly, Williams is so excited by the trains that he turns them into pulsing, glowing beings. In fact, he turns the entire exchange of passengers and trains into a dance, as suggested by the title.

As celebratory as Williams is, Whitman is even more so. His most famous poem, "Song of Myself" is exactly that—a song celebrating himself. In fact, *Song of Myself* honors all classes of people, all animals, all cities, and all nature. However, two poems in particular stand as possible sources, or influences, for Williams' poem. Whitman's poem "Years of the Modern" remains a classic panegyric of contemporary America. The poem begins: "Years of the modern! years of the unperform'd! / Your horizon rises, I see it parting away for more august dramas." Here, Whitman praises the modernity of America, even though the poem was written in the middle of the nineteenth century. The idea behind the poem is that present-day America, the America in which the poet lives, deserves and even demands veneration. Just as Whitman lauds the promise of the rising horizon, so does Williams laud the potential of America, as exemplified by the surging, capable locomotives. However, the locomotive as a symbol for progress and innovation does not lie with Williams alone. Whitman's poem "To a Locomotive in Winter" reads like a blueprint for Williams' text. Like Williams, Whitman personifies the train ("black cylindric body," "fire-throated beauty," "madly-whistled laughter") even to the point, like Williams, of allotting it passion ("thy measured dual throbbing" and "thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar"). But most intriguing of all is how Whitman, like Williams, sees the locomotive as a symbol of advancement and innovation. Whitman writes, "Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent, / For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse." One can imagine Walt Whitman watching with wonder as the train chugs and puffs and blows smoke into the winter air as it glides along the tracks. An impressive engineering achievement, it is no wonder Whitman would identify the locomotive as the emblem of modern America's promise of progress, an identification his poetic heir would make a generation later. And just as Whitman saw the train as a means of connection, of merging, so would Williams see the station as a grand terminal, an even larger type of the modern.

In the last few lines of his locomotive poem, Whitman links the train to music, so it is not surprising to remember that Williams engenders his poem with metaphors of dance. Dances and music always repeat, returning upon themselves, as do trains. For both Williams and Whitman, the music and dance of trains hold symbolic value for American culture, whether, the dance is "sure," as Williams would suggest, or whether, according to Whitman, the train remains "unpent and glad and strong."

Source: Dean Rader, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Smith is a writer and editor. In this essay, she discusses how William Carlos Williams' "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" juxtaposes the modern world of locomotive travel with thoughts of the infinite.

In *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem,* critic Charles Doyle observed that Williams' undertaking was a process of distilling things to their essence:

Seeing clearly, for him, was the great virtue□. Throughout Williams's career we encounter the isolation of the moment of clear perception or experience as if it were hard won from the ever- encroaching flux. In a constant state of alertness the artist makes his discoveries□. Genuine contact is made through concentration on the object with great intensity, to 'lift it' to the imagination. An object lifted to the imagination reveals its 'radiant gist.' Sometimes this is simply discovered, while at others □ the process is completed by the poet by means of invention or structuring.

In many of Williams' early poems, the poem itself is presented in a pure, distilled moment. "The Red Wheelbarrow," arguably his most famous poem, presents a poised and timeless image of "a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water." Likewise, one can hear echoes of Japanese haiku in his "Poem":

As the cat
climbed over
the top of
the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot
carefully
then the hind
stepped down
into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

In poems such as these, the poet fixates on a single image, or motion, and presents it as an unpretentious thing of beauty.

However, in William Carlos Williams' "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," originally published in the volume *Sour Grapes* (1921), the poet achieves a feeling of stillness through a different process. He paints a whole spectrum of activity, drawing the reader's attention to various objects and sounds, and briefly and exquisitely focusing upon them. Thus, Williams is inviting the reader to go through the distillation process with him.

"Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" is set in a busy train station. Even the title of the poem prepares the reader for a grand scene—an overture usually refers to an

instrumental composition intended as an opening piece to an extended musical work. Likewise, in the mind of the poet the locomotives are dancing—a surreal, almost psychedelic image. This coexistence of precise and swirling images is apparent even in the opening lines of the poem: "Men with picked voices chant the names / of cities in a huge gallery." The chanting and "huge"-ness imply that the reader is in the middle of a larger-than-life scene. However, some images have a striking clarity: the men have "picked voices," presumably clear and ringing. Likewise, they are chanting specific, recognizable things: names of cities, the trains' destinations.

The choice of the locomotive, as the dominant image of the poem, is significant in light of Williams' ideologies. Considered one of America's leading modernists, Williams relentlessly pursued the development of a distinctly American mode of verse, different from the English verse traditions used by his contemporaries Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Fittingly, the locomotive is in many ways a distinctly American machine. Its development in the 1800s gave form and structure to the fulfillment of manifest destiny—the idea that the United States would reach the Pacific Ocean—by enabling more and more people to travel West.

Williams' American-ness can be compared to the uniquely American poet who preceded him, Walt Whitman. Whitman had a voice as vast and dramatic as the Western landscape. And although Williams' verse is exuberant, it is more along the lines of what critic Charles Tomlinson called a "cubist re-structuring of reality." (Cubism is an early twentieth-century school of painting and sculpture in which natural forms are presented through abstract, often geometric, fragments.) Williams' cubistinfluenced consideration of the locomotives suggests an evolving American consciousness.

Certainly Williams' experience of the train station is different, ultimately darker, than what Whitman would have related. Williams calls echoes of the cities' names "promises / that pull through descending stairways / to a deep rumbling." Presumably, the stairways lead to the trains waiting on the tracks, but his description of them can be seen as ominous. However, in the following stanza Williams also shows compassion. He calls attention to "The rubbing feet / of those coming to be carried." Although the passengers are presented only as anonymous feet, the poet depicts them as coming to be carried, as if seeking deliverance.

Next, the poet turns his attention to the physical reality of the train station:

"soft light that rocks
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,
across and across from pale
earth-colored walls of bare limestone.

Suddenly, the reader is aware that the train station is grand, elegant, and still, despite the activity within its walls. The rocking of the light suggests meditation and comfort, as if one were in a cradle. Likewise, the limestone walls suggest the timelessness of rock, and a connection to the earth.

The feeling of timelessness is further developed in the next stanza. "Covertly the hands of a great clock / go round and round!" the poet declares. He seems not to notice, or care, that the clock operates according to well-defined increments of time. Instead, the hands of the clock are playful, like a merry-go-round. The poet's imagination thrives on this image, and he wonders what would happen if, in effect, time ceased:

Were [the clock hands] to move quickly and at
once the whole
secret would be out and the shuffling
of all ants be done forever.

Now, instead of being playful, the poet's imagination is dark and cosmic. In effect, he is fantasizing about the end of time and the cessation of all life. Something about the frenzy inside the station has led him to feel a sense of doom.

As if to temper these disturbing thoughts, the poet shifts his attention again, this time to the light:

A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing out at a high window, moves by the clock: discordant hands straining out from a center.

The phrase "pyramid of sunlight," especially as related to a clock, evokes the structures of the ancient Egyptians: pyramids and sundials. The hands on the clock in the train station seem to be full of life. They strike poses&mdahs;"inevitable postures infinitely repeated." They are anonymous, like the people whose feet shuffle through the station, and have, seemingly, been in effect since ancient times.

Through this scene comes a cry: "two—twofour—twoeight!" This sound, echoing the beat of the locomotive's wheels gaining momentum, sends a jolt through the frenzied dance within both the station and the poet's mind. The reader's focus shifts to the characters at hand: "Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms. / This way ma'am! / — important not to take the wrong train!" The poet's consideration of infinity has been replaced by a woman hurrying to catch a train. For now, considerations of the immediate have replaced the eternal

The poet briefly considers his larger surroundings again, noticing that "Lights from the concrete / ceiling hang crooked, but—" and his thoughts are cut off, interrupted again by the image of a train waiting on the tracks. The scene is comforting to him: train tracks are "glittering parallels;" the cylinders, though dingy, "invit[e] entry." The poet also notes that they "pull against the hour": a suggestion that the locomotive itself is in a complex relationship with time. The first kind of mechanized travel, the locomotive contradicts traditional notions of how long it takes to get somewhere. In that way, it defies time, making it seem irrelevant.

Again, though, the abstractions are interrupted, this time by a whistle. The churning of the locomotive wheels speeds up: "Not two eight. Not twofour. Two!" The poet watches the train pull out, seeing several realities pass by: "Gliding windows. Colored cooks

sweating / In a small kitchen. Taillights—" and the train keeps going, according to a very strict rhythm: "In time: twofour! / In time: twoeight!"

In the final stanza the poet shifts perspective again, this time considering the path that the locomotive will take. He considers a landscape: "—rivers are tunnelled: trestles / cross oozy swampland." The ability of a locomotive to cross such difficult terrain is indeed a feat of the modern era. At the same time, though, the train has a quality of stillness: "wheels that repeat the same gesture remain relatively / stationary." Finally, the poet meditates on the rails; they too have a universal quality, "forever parallel / return on themselves infinitely." In this infiniteness the poet feels as if he has found certainty: "The dance is sure."

The world that Williams has distilled for the reader is both rarefied and frightening. He can look at things deeply, seeing the realities of the station, feeling the thrill of locomotive travel, while at the same time considering them alongside the eternal concepts of time and space. His suggestion of confusion and doom reflects his modern sensibility, but, ultimately, his faith in "the dance" prevails.

Source: Erica Smith, in an essay *for Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Barron is an associate professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. Beginning in 2001, he will be the editor-in-chief of The Robert Frost Review. In the following essay, he considers the impact of the early 20th-century artistic movement, Italian Futurism, on "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives."

In the history of twentieth-century art, Italian futurism was one of the first and most exciting new movements to include both poetry and painting. It began in 1909 when Italian poet and painter F. T. Marinetti published a manifesto. This dramatic fullpage article, published in the staid, conservative Paris newspaper *Le Figaro,* announced the birth of a new idea for art. Among that paper's respectable readership, the manifesto caused a sensation, because it challenged and contested the readers' mostly traditional notions of poetry and painting. Soon the movement became notorious. By 1910, five Italian painters had joined with Marinetti. Together they announced, in another manifesto, the existence of futurist painting. Marinetti, meanwhile, had gone further still in his experimentation with language and declared the freedom of the word with the now famous, if not infamous, phrase "parole in liberta" (words in freedom). Marinetti's new poetic program of "word freedom" argued that words themselves needed to be free and so had to break from the rules of syntax (logical sentence order). He declared that poets should play with typeface and page arrangements. Let words on the page happen wherever they want, he demanded. He advocated the use of huge bold type, italics, tiny print, and giant print on the same page, even in the same sentence. He called on poets to play with every kind of typographical trick. Do not, he argued, just print poems line after line in a logical order leading to a conclusion.

By 1917, when William Carlos Williams first made his "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" public, Italian futurism, particularly among poets and painters, had achieved international attention: exhibitions, performances, and what, today, would be called interventions—crazy, surprising, creative happenings in unexpected places—had occurred in London, Paris, and New York. Already in 1917, Williams was himself part of the avant-garde scene in Greenwich Village, New York. His closest friends were painters and poets in the futurist mold. So it was not surprising that he, too, should be a part of avant-garde festivals. In fact, it was at one of these festivals in New York, according to the scholars of Williams' poetry, A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowen, that William Carlos Williams first "read the 'futurist' poem" "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives." Specifically, they report that Williams read the poem at "the Independents exhibition of avant-garde art that opened at Grand Central Palace in April 1917." Eventually, this same poem was published in Williams' book of other futurist, and similarly experimental, avantgarde poetry, *Sour Grapes* (1921).

Given that the poem first came to public attention in a futurist artistic milieu, what does it mean to think of this poem as futurist? Before answering that question in detail, it will help to provide some more information about futurism itself. In a wonderful book detailing the connection between poets, composers, and painters in the early twentieth century, the English literary critic Christopher Butler explains that: "For the Futurist the

city is the environment in which the museumbound culture of the past can be subverted, and new boundaries between art and life evolved." What Butler means is that city things in the first part of the twentieth-century had been devalued and condemned as anti-human, alienating, even destructive to the soul and to happiness. The Italian futurists, by contrast, loved the city and the new kind of lifestyle it made possible. They loved the new facts of speed, machines, and action. They loved all the urban things that a romantic and agrarian art world thought of as mechanized death. What was to the romantic imagination the very source of destruction to the inner life of the feeling soul, was to the Italian futurist a source of invigorating joy and pleasure: the city. To the futurist, the city was the site of a new human being. Therefore, they wanted to abolish museums, because the museums contradicted the city's relentless drive toward new things. Everything devoted to the past, the futurist opposed. Futurists, as their name implies, only cared for the present—an eternal present leading to the future, but at constant war with the dead weight and burden of the past.

Butler adds that futurism "promised an urban subject-matter which was also to be stirred up and given a crudely dynamic quality." In other words, futurist painting and poetry accented motion, dynamism, and speed, and refused to work out of the traditions of art history and poetic history that privileged geometry, stability, and the still life. Futurism attempted to destroy the preceding history of art by making energy, speed, and action part of the painting and the poem itself. Butler even reports that one of the futurist painters, Umberto Boccioni, described just what was so new and exciting, so dynamic, about the city when he said: "we enter into the overwhelming vortex of modernity through its crowds, its automobiles, its telegraphs, its bare lower-class neighbourhoods (sic), its sounds, its shrieks, its violence, its cruelties, its cynicism." Boccioni and his friends wanted to depict, praise, even celebrate such things in their art. Their poet compatriots meant to do the same.

Another literary critic and a scholar of Italian futurism Peter Nicholls insists that its most important characteristic was a focus on time. To Nicholls, Italian futurism must be understood as an entirely, absolutely new artistic movement. He says it was "a moment of absolute rupture with what has gone before." Marinetti himself accented this pursuit of the new and this disdain for the past when he went so far as to demand that all museums be burned. To the Italian futurist, in other words, the new twentieth-century industrial city experience was the only human experience worth discussing precisely because it was so new. Inner life, the soul, they argued, could, given the fact of city life, now only be represented in terms of motion, speed, and machines. As Nicholls says, "time flows away, carrying with it experiences that cannot be lived again, though they can become present momentarily as memories."

The Italian futurist association of human experience with machines, speed, urban architecture, and time, as well as its focus on the new, is at the very heart of William Carlos Williams' poem. And while this poem is not as crazy in its typography, word order, or use of typeface as are some other futurist poems, it is, nonetheless, typically futurist through its use of fragments, jump-cuts from one scene to another, and urban imagery and themes.

Williams' poem is particularly futurist because it refuses to tell the romantic story of how one man feels in a particular place. There is no one human being in this poem. There is no one character. Instead of a character, the poem has city people, trains, a train station. Things and people seem to co-exist on the same field. Every item that Williams asks the reader to see—trains, stairs, light, feet, sidewalk, clock—shares equal prominence. This is not a poem about people in the city. Rather it is a poem about a city where all of its things, even people, are understood to be equivalent objects. Futurists loved to make such points in their art and poetry. They loved to say that people were not so special, and that they should be no more important than machines. They loved to make people and things equivalent. For doing such things, they were often called anti-humanists.

Specifically, Williams' poem takes place in New York City's Pennsylvania Station which, in 1917, was a cathedral to the modern city. Eventually destroyed, this railroad station, in its day, was a modern wonder. A huge vault of glass designed by the famous architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White, it was, in the words of New York historian Elizabeth Hawes, the firm's "masterpiece." Inspired by the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, the station filled all those who entered it with a sense of awe. Eight years in the making, it covered eight acres of prime Manhattan real estate when it opened in 1910. As Hawes explains, the firm that built the station were the architects of choice for the city's wealthy elite. She tells readers that McKim, Mead, and White had "taught the aristocracy all they knew about Renaissance style": they had built "houses, clubs, and memorials" for the rich, and "[t]hey were doubtless the busiest, the most fashionable, the most eminent architects in America the high priests of classicism." This is especially relevant because Pennsylvania Station was one of their only public buildings. True, this was a time when passenger railroads, like the Pennsylvania line, were private companies, but they were also dependent on civic structures. Therefore, of all the places for Williams to choose for his poem, he chooses one of the fanciest, most amazing public and modern buildings in the most vibrant and largest city in America. In a poem about the glories of city life, industry, and machines, he uses, as his primary scene, the most glorious public building (only seven years old) in the city. The station itself, in other words, was already considered a futurist artwork by Williams and his friends just by being so beautiful, so new, and so colossal in scope.

Turning, now, directly to the poem, one sees that it presents a specifically futurist tension between stasis (standing still, things that do not move) and flux (motion, energy, movement). This tension between stasis and flux is also a common element in futurist painting. And in this poem, Williams, like a painter, creates images that will show how time itself might exist in a perpetual present as constant energy with no past.

Looking first at the title, one discovers that Williams challenges the static, non-moving quality of dead words on a page. By calling the poem an "Overture," he compares it to the musical opening, or introduction to a longer work, usually an opera. In this case, the overture, or musical introduction, will come before a dance. But this dance, it turns out, is a dance of trains, of locomotives. The city, thanks to this title, is already an artwork, a grand symphony and a grand ballet. Since music and dance are arts of movement, dependent on sequence in time and moment of performance, Williams has, with this

title, taken the reader out of the poetry and, metaphorically, placed the reader right into the thick of the city; it is as if New York itself were an action, a performance work in progress. Given this title, then, one might also say that Williams is asking readers to think of the train station as a site where a symphony of sound becomes an overture to a dance of trains. Such a perspective can only be understood through the lens of Italian futurism.

To read the poem as a futurist work, one begins, then, with the musical metaphor of the titles. Like a futurist musical performance, which futurists called "the art of noise," the first stanza tells us that the music comes from the rhythmical chanting of the various cities to which the trains are headed. Echoing through the huge dome of Pennsylvania Station, the "picked voices chant the names" and so create a new, urban, modern music. Following the colon in line two, Williams explains what this new music does: the repeated names are "promises / that pull through descending stairways / to a deep rumbling." Every name becomes a lure that will send people down the stairs to the train platforms where more music, "a deep rumbling," awaits. The names from on high echo in the dome's air and lure the passengers to the stairs where the sound of the trains will add more notes to their journey, their own dance as they speed off to exotic temptations in other cities. This first stanza is distinctly futurist, then, because what would typically be a static scene—a huge room at the center of a train station—is depicted entirely through metaphors of energy and motion. Even the noise moves up and down the stairs.

In the second stanza, Williams changes his scene with a cut to an entirely new image. This, too, is a typical strategy of Italian futurism. The second stanza brings readers outside of the station. Readers are asked to see people entering from the street. At the same time, Williams describes the light that, like the people, is also moving. Rather than focus on one, or even many, characters, Williams, instead, only lets readers see "rubbing feet." This is a poem of the masses, of the group. In this second stanza, then, two new instruments have joined the overture: feet and light have joined with train sounds and announcements. Notice that the feet "quicken a / grey pavement into soft light." The light, meanwhile, "rocks / to and fro, under the domed ceiling."

The third stanza, as was true of the first two, also changes the scene. Now back inside the station Williams focuses on the giant clock. He describes the clock's hands, and, in so doing, he makes time itself an issue for the poem. Because the Italian futurists expected their art to defeat the past and champion the present, Williams, in this stanza, tells his readers that "Covertly the hands of a great clock / go round and round!" In the actual experience of this train station, in other words, the clock's constant changing is not noticed. It is "covert." This is another way of saying that, to those hurrying to catch a train, the passage of time, the creation of a past, has to be covert: all that matters is the present moment, the future, and the hope that one will not miss one's train. In a real overture in a real symphony, the moment of the performance is also happening just then: it, too, is always present. In this stanza, Williams articulates a futurist vision. Describing the hands of the clock he says:

Were they to
move quickly and at once the whole
secret would be out and the shuffling
of all ants be done forever.

The "secret" Williams refers to, here, is the secret of "time." In this city, in the futurist vision of the world, time does not exist if time means the need to think of and depend on the burden of the past. In fact, says Williams, the city is so energized, so dependent on speed, that everything feels like it is moving "quickly and at once." Were the misguided "feet" hurrying to their trains and wishing to maintain their regulated commuter lives to know that all time happens "at once," they would no longer be ants but rather they would be men and women, fully attuned to the overture and dance of the continuous present.

As if to insist on the futurist need for an eternal now of constant, ever-present energy in the living moment, Williams plays the image of light against the image of the clock. In this dance, nature's time, sunlight, contrasts with human time, the mechanical clock. Williams describes the "pyramid of light" moving by the clock. When the geometrically precise natural light (a pyramid) hits the mechanical hands, it proves that the clock is just "disaccordant hands straining out from a center." In other words, the clock is just two points forced to travel round and round a surface: its real energy is too controlled, not liberated and natural like the sunlight. When he says this, Williams implicitly judges all those hurrying feet. He implies that if they would only liberate themselves from the clock, they would be even more free, more committed to the eternal present. He implies that movement, energy, speed ought not to be bound to two hands on a circle: that a clock always refers, if even covertly, to the past.

When Williams did finally publish this poem in his 1921 collection, he concluded the first section just after line twenty. Such a division, however, actually maintains the poem's futurist quality. By breaking the poem into two parts here, Williams suggests that after line twenty, the overture has concluded, and now the dance can begin. Following the music of time, Williams next represents the dance of the locomotives. In the concluding twenty lines of the poem, labeled in Sour Grapes with a roman numeral two, one finds far more choppy syntax, and a lot more interruptions and jump-cuts from scene to scene. The poem, as it were, speeds up. The final twenty-four lines (Part II) are constantly interrupted by voices. Even the words seem to dance on the page. Be that as it may, by the end of the poem, the trains begin to move, the dance has certainly begun as the trains become the focus of the poem. Ultimately, Williams even follows a train out of the station and along its way into the great country where, presumably, the dance will continue. Futurism, in this poem, is always now, never confined to any one place.

Source: Jonathan N. Barron, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

A video that features brief clips of Williams, visual representations of his poems and commentary by leading scholars was released in 1988 through the PBS Voices and Visions series.

Williams reads his own poems on an audiocassette entitled *William Carlos Williams Reads,* published by HarperCollins.

There is a small website devoted to Williams, including a bibliography at http://www.charm. net/~brooklyn/People/WilliamCarlosWilliams. html (August 18, 2000).

A page exploring Williams' connection between poetry and art is available at http://www.cwrl. utexas.edu/~slatin/20c_poetry/projects/relatproject/ WCW.html (August 18, 2000).

The best Williams web site is at http://www. poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=120 (August 18, 2000) and is maintained by the Academy of American poets. The page not only features text and images but also links to poems.

Topics for Further Study

To what degree does the form of the poem mirror or complement the theme of the poem?

Look at another poem by Williams, perhaps "March" or "History" and explain how and why the poems are similar. Are they similar only in form, or do they share some common thematic concerns?

Imagine the poem as a painting. What would it look like? Try to describe it as best you can. Does it remind you of any other paintings or photographs?

Do you agree with the critical interpretations of the poem? Does Williams succeed in transforming the station into a cathedral? Is the exchange of passengers and trains similar to a dance?

What kind of dance would the poem suggest? A waltz? A cha cha? Hip Hop? Swing?

Think of ways in which the poem resembles a musical composition. Does the form of the poem contribute to its musicality?

Do you agree with Williams that trains and train stations are appropriate metaphors for American progress and democracy? Would something else serve as a better metaphor at this point in history?

Compare and Contrast

1917: Wallace Stevens writes what some scholars consider his most Williamesque poem, *"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."*

1917: T. S. Eliot publishes one of his most famous poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

1917: Friend and supporter of Williams, Ezra Pound publishes the first of his famous and infamous "Cantos" in small magazines.

1917: In support of our allies in Western Europe, namely Great Britain, the United States enters World War I. For the first time, world wide newspapers carry stories and photographs of war.

1941: After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States declares war on Japan and enters World War II. Newsreels offer glimpses of the casualties of modern-day warfare to eager moviegoers.

1989: When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, the United States bombs Iraq, initiating the Gulf War. Much of the fighting is captured and broadcast on national television.

1913: The Armory Show, an exhibit of European post-impressionism and cubism, takes place in New York. For the first time, many Americans see the work of Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cezanne, and Georges Braque. Duchamp's cubist painting "Nude Descending the Staircase" causes much controversy.

1917: Planned by many of the same people involved in the Armory Show, the 1917 Independents Exhibition in New York takes place. Williams reads his poem *"Overture to a Dance of Locomotives."*

1999: At the "Sensations" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, a painting by African artist Chris Ofili enrages many people, including the mayor of New York, because Ofili's piece features a droplet of elephant dung on a representation of the Virgin Mary.

What Do I Read Next?

The poet most often compared to Williams is the great American poet Wallace Stevens, who was Williams' longtime friend. Like Williams, Stevens held an interest in art and poetic form. Stevens' *Collected Poems,* published in 1954, collects most of his published poetry.

The 1989 publication *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin:* Selected Letters collects the fascinating correspondences between Williams and his editor at New Directions.

William's *I Wanted to Write a Poem,* a 1958 autobiography features Williams talking about how he came to be a poet and how he thinks of his poetic career.

Another poet commonly linked to Williams is Ezra Pound. His *Selected Poems* offers a survey of his poetic career, which takes a very different path than that of Williams'.

Many Loves and Other Plays is a collection of all seven plays that Williams wrote.

The catalogue *Pennsylvania Modern: Charles Demuth of Lancaster,* edited by Betsy Fahlman, offers some interesting illustrations of the modernist painter's work.

Edward Fry's important book *Cubism* offers a detailed history of the important art movement. Some critics claim that many of Williams' poems, including "Overture," reflect cubist ideals.

Albert Gelpi's comprehensive study of modern American poetry *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950* offers readings of Williams, Stevens, Pound, Eliot, and other important American poets.

Further Study

Axelrod, Steven Gould and Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on William Carlos Williams,* G. K. Hall, 1988.

This book collects both early and late reviews of Williams' books and offers a large menu of essays exploring the myriad of Williams' poetry

Duffey, Bernard, *A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.

Instead of focusing on either poetry or prose or drama, Duffey sees all of these as interrelated writings that help define Williams and his themes.

Mariani, Paul, *A New World Naked,* McGraw, 1981.

A comprehensive critical biography of Williams placing his poems in both personal and cultural contexts. It is well-researched and contains some helpful pictures.

Mazzaro, Jerome, ed. *A Profile of William Carlos Williams,* C. E. Merrill, 1971.

A valuable collection of essays by leading scholars and poets who comment on various aspects of Williams' poetry.

----, *William Carlos Williams: The Later Poems,* Cornell University Press, 1973.

Since commentary on "Overture" usually falls in studies of Williams' early poetry, it is sometimes useful to look at studies of his later work. This book may prove useful because Mazzaro tries to show how the later poems fulfill the dreams of the younger poet.

Rosenthal, M. L., A *William Carlos Williams Reader,* New Directions, 1996.

A very useful book that collects selected poems, "improvisations," fiction, drama and excerpts from Williams' autobiography. It is an excellent starting point for further reading of Williams' work.

Bibliography

Ahearn, Barry, *William Carlos Williams and Alterity: The Early Poetry,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Butler, Christopher, *Early Modernism,* Oxford University Press, 1994.

Doyle, Charles, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem,* St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Halter, Peter, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Litz, A. Walton and Christopher MacGowen, editors, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Vol. 1,* New Directions, 1986.

Marling, William, *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909-1923,* Ohio University Press, 1982.

MacGowan, Christopher J., *William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Background,* UMI Research Press, 1984.

Nicholls, Peter, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide,* University of California Press, 1995.

Schmidt, Peter, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, And Literary Tradition,* Louisiana State University, 1988.

Williams, William Carlos, *Selected Poems,* edited by Charles Tomlinson, New Directions, 1985.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535