

Sample explication

Nantucket

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains--
Smell of cleanliness--

Sunshine of late afternoon--
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying--And the
immaculate white bed

-- William Carlos Williams

Joie de Vivre: William Carlos Williams's "Nantucket"

"Nantucket" by William Carlos Williams is a short lyric poem of five two-line stanzas which vividly describes a room, presumably on the Atlantic island of Nantucket, off Massachusetts. The poem consists entirely of imagistic phrases, noting the flowers through the window, the sunshine, a glass tray, a glass pitcher and tumbler, a key, and finally "the / immaculate white bed." It reads like a verbal still-life, painterly in its precise rendering of things seen and adding to sight another sensual appeal: the "smell of cleanliness." Similar to Williams's more famous "The Red Wheelbarrow" in its sharp focus and love for what is ordinary, the poem, within its own small frame, is richly colored and shaped. It creates clean, fresh, airy intimate space, beginning with the enticing and benedictory view from a window and ending, as if inevitably, at a bed, which seems equally luminous and inviting. The poet's palette is limited but lush: lavender and yellow set off by white, the color that sunshine takes on in late afternoon, and the translucent no-color of glass. This is a vision of pleasure: composed, quiet, secure, anticipatory, reminiscent of some imagined painted room by (17th century Dutch painter) Jan Vermeer before the people have entered it, or an eroticized interior by the modern French painter Henri Matisse. Here is a poem of unswerving objectivity and directness, a poem seemingly without an "I" or any other protagonist, and yet the poem nonetheless proclaims gladly the subjectivity of the eye, which can glean secret meaning from the very surfaces of objects, from their casual proximity to each other, from their compositional interactions.

The poem showcases Williams's affinity for the modernist school of Imagism, which extolled economical use of language, concentration, rhythmic individuality, a commitment to presenting "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," in the poet Ezra Pound's memorable phrase. "Nantucket" resists making symbols of the contents of the room it portrays. Yet the poem in its entirety could be said to be a metaphor which suppresses its own tenor, letting the vehicle speak clearly and suggestively. Like the traditional Japanese poetic form, haiku, the poem restricts its subject matter to objective description that nevertheless evokes a definite, albeit unstated, emotional response. Williams was often beguiled by a similar discipline of suggesting a very great deal in the fewest possible words, and he chose ordinary words from spoken American English. In this poem, he declines even the ambiguous commentary of lines like "So much depends / upon," or "these things / astonish me beyond words," which leaven the strict Imagism in two other of his small poems ("The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Pastoral," respectively).

Williams's stanza form was not inherited, but finely honed by his intense personal engagement with his subject. Each of the stanzas in "Nantucket" is comprised of two lines of almost equal length. Each of these lines contain two or three accented syllables, rendering them light but chiseled, casual-seeming, and yet composed. At first the lines emjamb on nouns and adjectives of solid description, but by line 8 (which ends with the pronoun "which"), and line 9 (ending with the phrase "And the"), emjambment on less weighty words causes anticipation in the reader for the poem's (by then) most emotionally freighted items: the key and the bed.

Three devices contributing to the delicate, brilliant sound and feel of the poem are the four aerated white spaces between stanzas, the reliance solely on dashes for internal punctuation, and the lack of any closing punctuation. This last leaves the impression that there is indeed more to say about “the / immaculate white bed” which has been so magnificently introduced by a mid-line, upper-case “And” -- itself introduced by one of those breathless dashes. The poem is built of six noun phrases, subjects that promise to lead to verbs, and then do not, deferring all action to beyond or after the poem, and thereby riveting the reader’s attention on the objects at hand, while increasing the sense that there is more here than meets the eye, and more that could be expressed. The poem relies heavily on prepositions – through, by, of, on, by -- which reveal to the reader’s visual imagination the compositional integrity of the piece, despite its teasingly incomplete sentences.

Rather than the directness of rhyme, Williams uses smaller, more subtle sound repetitions to weave his poem together, to give it supple form. “Yellow” echoes “window” in the first stanza, as do the “er” endings of “flowers” and lavender.” Alliteration works its understated way through the poem: curtains/cleanliness, tray/tumbler/turned. In a poem devoid, in true Imagist fashion, of superfluous words, the repetition of the word “glass,” tying together stanzas three and four, speaks emphatically, and reminds the reader of the capacity of glass to catch and reflect light. In a poem built primarily of quiet, forward moving iambics, the ending spondee of “white bed,” impresses the reader’s ear with its sudden substance. The insistence on words indicating cleanliness indicate the poet’s yearning for a romantic experience both passionate and wholesome, both voluptuous and chaste, purged of guilt and capable of expressing full *joie de vivre*.

Williams resisted symbolism because he felt it too readily and perfunctorily gave up the thing itself for an imposed or imported meaning. But here the window, the key, the bed, the glass all declare the beauty and particularity of their physical forms – their ideal reality, their radiant thingness. This has the paradoxical effect of renewing the symbolic depth and urgency of these objects as potent indicators of intimacy, chosen attributes of a room that *will* declare its emotional character, if only the reader attend to it as devotedly as does the poet.

“Nantucket” reads as a humble list of things etched out with such care that taken together they add up to a poem spoken by a lover in anticipation of a rendezvous, who savors everything associated with this most significant afternoon. With great delicacy, the poem declines to mention either the beloved or the self, or to speak in what is usually considered the language of emotion. A setting only is described, without the characters, without the action, like a set design revealed for admiration before the action of the play begins. The “setting” is a bedroom of surpassing beauty and privacy (in a cottage guesthouse on Nantucket, high summer?), as yet untouched, all in readiness, redolent of its own imminent moment of romantic intimacy, passion, and fulfillment. Like a white page, that white bed awaits its inevitable story. The flowers “changed by white curtains” and the sunshine, are all of the wide outdoors to be admitted, the key assures privacy, and suggests possession, for a time, of a room’s contours and comforts. “For love, all love of other sights controls, / And makes one little room, an everywhere” as the 17th century metaphysical poet John Donne would have it, in his own poem extolling a room set apart for lovemaking (“The Good-morrow”). Throughout his career, Williams believed in the energies of love and sexual attraction, and in the clear presentation of what was in front of his eyes. In this poem, he uses the latter to increase the unspoken power of the former. The poem delights precisely because it does not insist on its own profundity or importance, or on a melodramatic or ideological defense of sexual love; it merely luxuriates in its own present physical surroundings, which are felt to reflect the observer’s desire and anticipate its fulfillment.

The poem “Nantucket” serves to demonstrate, within its small compass, many of Williams’s characteristic themes, and particularly his conviction that the world is always full of fresh meaning, available by means of close attention and aesthetic imagination. As in so many of his poems, it is charged with eroticism, more startling and wonderful here for being held back, diffusing through the entire atmosphere. With its painterly framing, attention to color, arrangement of constituent elements, and emphasis on sight, it declares Williams’s appetite for visual art, his career-long willingness to learn from the techniques and insights of the painters. Its preference for beauty and its optimism presses back against the strain of dark pessimism and alienation expressed by other poets of his generation, particularly T.S. Eliot, with whom he had many standing differences in temperament and opinion. It defers to other poems his own tendencies toward disgust and despair, and his worry that that America can sustain no more than a “thin veneer” culture, apt to corrupt rather than elevate. Yet, to catalog the world as it appears in the here and now, on a particular (and particularly) American island, in language only slightly elevated from the vernacular, to celebrate sex, love, and beauty, to note the upside-down position of a glass tumbler, to generate delight and anticipation by means of inventive prosody -- these are among the tasks that Williams set himself, and realized in the poem “Nantucket.”

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