Cary Nelson: On "The Young Housewife"

Along with Hughes and Frost, Williams is one of the three betterknown modern American male poets whose work includes a wide range of portraits of individual women. The difference, however, is that Williams's interest is consistently both social and erotic. Like Ransom, women are indispensable to Williams's work; without their presence in his poetry, his oeuvre would be substantially impoverished. Unlike Ransom, however, his perspective on women is rich and varied and generally affirmative; moreover, Williams often treats men and women in much the same way, something Ransom is disinclined to do. That does not exempt Williams from charges of sexism. No doubt many contemporary readers would be troubled by the characterization of women at various points in his work and find many of his "affirmations" reifying. Indeed no one who has grown up in a sexist culture will be entirely free of sexism, but Williams's work often partly triumphs over these limitations and it is, if anything, strengthened by comparison with other men and women writing at the same time.

Williams regularly wrote poems about men's and women's interactions and love poems to women throughout his long career; their approach can be sacralizing, irreverent, erotic, mythologizing, or realistic. His brief imagistic portraits of individual women remain among the best-known poems he wrote. These portraits are often sexually charged, but then almost everything Williams describes is. Like Amy Lowell's flower imagery, for example, or Georgia O'Keefe's flower paintings, Williams's flowers are charged with sexuality. Indeed, even his most spare descriptions of natural objects, as in the 1927 "Young Sycamore," are highly sensual. It is possible that the human body (and, more specifically, a woman's body) is the implicit object underlying many of the individual things he celebrates. Notably, however, his physical descriptions of men, as in the 1919 "The Young Laundryman," are also quite sensual and equally focussed on telling details:

. . .his muscles ripple
under the thin blue shirt; and his naked feet, in
Their straw sandals, lift at the heels, shift and
Find new postures continually.

Williams certainly fragments men's and women's bodies to describe them, but he most often does so in order to assemble either telling portraits of whole persons or representative characterizations of people's social positioning. If there is a hint of objectification in the process of representation in Williams's work, then, it seems relatively harmless; that is a cultural and political judgement on my part, but I am willing to make it. Representation wholly without objectification may in fact be impossible. When it predominates and when there is nothing else, that is another matter. But treating any trace of it in earlier periods as a fatal heresy is irrational. Recent fervor about objectification may be a contemporary neurosis we would be better off not imposing on our predecessors. At the very least, there is the chance that such charges are hopelessly anachronistic. On the other hand, as I suggested earlier, the
arguments disseminated simultaneously with modernism by the first wave of modern feminism give more than sufficient warrant to read Pound's and Ransom's sexism severely and consider it misogynist even within its historical context. Williams, again, presents a more complex and nuanced case.

Part of what sustains poems like Williams's 1916 "The Young Housewife," in which the woman observed "moves about in negligee behind / the wooden walls of her husband's house," beyond its spare, precise description, is Williams's willingness to acknowledge and mock his presence as an observer. As with "Woman Walking" (pp. 66-67), the poet is never simply an invisible figure who wields the power to name and describe but rather a speaker whose voice effects a relationship in verse. And that relationship typically includes a genuine if sometimes whimsical reflection on the ontological issues at stake in the poet's role:

The poem masquerades at once as a piece of literal reportage and a fantasy surveillance, a celebration and critique of voyeurism. We may credit the speaker with some sensitivity to women's social status when the house is described as the husband's property, but we may also wonder (as one of my students suggested) if we can hear "negligent" and "negligible" judgmentally echoing within the negligee she wears, a garment as well that suggests more corporeal property rights. Whether the speaker would protect her, take advantage of her, or merely observe her in her shy vulnerability we cannot say. We cannot even be certain whose innocence wanes most notably in the poem's autumnal season, the speaker's, the young housewife's, or even the reader's, for we too are implicated in the poem's final recognition. Is it guilty self-recognition, mutual recognition, an exchange of glances, shame, regret, or delight in transience that sounds in the crackling leaves of the last stanza? One critic suggests that "the young housewife is metaphorically crushed in the last stanza," since, in the previous stanza's Shakespearean conclusion, she is herself compared to a fallen leaf. But it is as easily the moment and the fantasy relationship that give way as the car passes. Moreover, the only real pressure exerted is the poem's descriptive act of possession. Indeed, no fixed reading of Williams's short poems will survive sustained reflection, for--despite their straightforward narrativity--they remain so ambiguous and unresolved that one interpretation continually displaces or reverses another. Thus a particular poem may from one moment to the next seem distinctly sexist and generously understanding.

As many of Williams's critics have noted, there is also a strong mythologizing element in the image of women in his longer poems, from "The Wanderer" to Paterson. The woman who is his guide in "The Wanderer" is both young and old, virgin and whore. The latter identity, moreover, is partly celebratory; she is a "reveller in all ages-/ Knower of all fires out of the bodies Of all men." For Williams, anticipating an argument that I do not accept but that some feminists would later make explicitly, women have stronger links to the transformative natural processes that all of us must undergo if we are to rise above the pettiness and violence of so much of human history. Though they are closer to nature, at least as some cultural feminists would claim, women are of course in no way unconscious figures. Rather they have special knowledge that men must seek to share and that Williams would bring into his poetry. Williams is also aware that not every mythic vision of women is beneficial. In In the American Grain, in a journey that Pound completed in the opposite direction (minus the monarchist component, which Pound left to another American expatriate), Walter Raleigh fantasizes himself on a voyage on the body of his queen when he plunges "his lust into the body of a new world." It is a fantasy that ends in disaster.

What Williams shows us, finally, is one route to a substantially affirmative and generous heterosexuality in poetry. Williams clearly believed that sexual relations could reorient people
toward restorative natural processes and away from the destructive tendencies in modern culture. This differentiates him from Eliot, for example, for whom failed sexual relations in The Waste Land and other poems exemplified the modern condition; indeed, for Eliot nature itself no longer offered any hope. In a culture whose inherited and active linguisticality is permeated with gendered binarisms, Williams sorts out these meanings and reconfigures and resemanticizes them. There were certain binary metaphors of gender he found productive and life-enhancing, others he considered destructive and demonic. That all these gendered binarisms were fantasmatic-artifices of cultural process with no necessary grounding in the facts of nature-Williams may never have realized. But if we wish to judge him we had best realize that all of us live partly by way of myth and ideology. What one does not find in Williams, however, is a thoroughgoing critique of patriarchal culture and all the gendered binarisms by which it sustains and reproduces itself.


Publication Status:
Excerpted Criticism [1]
Publication:
- Private group -
Criticism Target:
William Carlos Williams [2]
Author:
Cary Nelson [3]
Poem:
The Young Housewife [4]

Source URL: https://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/cary-nelson-young-housewife

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