

Two Meanings of “white”-----on Robert Frost’s *Design* and William Carlos Williams’ *Queen-Anne’s-lace*¹

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Abstract. This paper is aimed to discuss the meaning of “white” in two poems: *Design* and *Queen-Anne’s-lace* written by Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams respectively. The author finds the rich meaning of simple word in the interpretation of famous poems.

Introduction

White, a simple word, everybody knows it. But things are not simple as the paper; “white” in an English dictionary: 1) of the color of fresh snow or common salt. That is very familiar to us. But the later meanings maybe are not very common. 2) pale, without the color of blood. 3) Empty, without anything in it....

In order to appreciate how well the poets interpret the whiteness, let us read two poems: *Design* by Robert Frost and *Queen-Anne’s-lace* by William Carlos Williams.

Firstly, Frost’s *Design*. Just as the title says, it offers us a picture--“a white fat spider on a white heal-all <a kind of blue flower> holds a white moth “and there are a lot of white things before us. There is nothing but whiteness, We are surrounded by whiteness, but we do not feel well, only terrible.

Secondly, Williams’ *Queen-Anne’s-lace*, which is another kind of flower. But this poem is more like a process than a picture. It tells us a story: The flower is not a perfect flower, nor a very charming one. It is even a little weak, but it is this common white flower that drives the wild carrot out of its field.

After reading them, we can immediately get this impression: The expressions of the two poems are absolutely different: the first terrifies us: death witches ‘broth, froth, all these kind of things makes our hair stand on end, it even gains the “poet of terror” for its author. How about the second one? Though “it is not so white, nor so smooth, it defeats the evil wild carrot, We are happy and satisfied with the result.

Why these two poems full of “white” are so sharply different? In the later part of this paper, we will discuss why the writers write whiteness, how do they describe, and what is the meaning of “white”. Before this, let us make a study of the life-story of the writers and the social background.

Author

Life-story

Robert Frost, 1874—1963, is out of a teacher’s family in San Francisco, and he passes his childhood in Western America. After his father’s death, he goes back to New England with his family to live with his grandfather. His mother has great influence on the forming of his character and literal career: being a pious adherent, very simple and honest, she sets a good model for him. Frost shows his talent of writing poems when he is a teenager, and then he withdraws from school because he has determined to be a poet. Things go well at first, in 1894, he publishes his first poem—*My butterfly*, but since then, nobody is willing to adopt his poems, he has to work hard to make a living. In 1912, he moves to England to devote all his energy to poems, where he has his

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first poetry –A boy’s will, Published. He has been a famous poet when he goes back to America, two years later. His reputation grows with each passing day until he becomes the greatest poet in his time.

William Carlos Williams, nine years younger than Frost, comes from New Jersey. His career is simpler than Frost’s. He studies pediatrics in Germany after graduating from Pennsylvania University and has pediatrics as his all-time occupation. He becomes a principle poet in America after his famous poem—spring and all published.

World outlook

Frost has a lifetime of frustrations. He begins to work in a shoe-factory to share the heavy burden with his mother, and does many odd jobs on farms; after giving up his study in school, he becomes a journalist, then a teacher, a farmer. These rich experiences make him mature, the hard time makes him strong in mind, the most important thing is that he can observe the world with the eyes of a poet. The design—a spider holding a moth on a flower is meaningless in common person’s mind, but Frost can abstract the meaning and identify the whiteness. That is impossible for a young person without any social knowledge.

Compared with Frost, Williams’ life seems to be smoother. Except studying pediatrics in Germany for one year and traveling in Europe twice, he spends all his life in America as a pediatrician. Because of his occupation, he has more chance to get in touch with children. Children’s features influence him little by little. Without knowing this, he shows this in his poems. One of the features of his poems is simplicity—easy to understand, not profound. The title –*Queen-Anne’s-Lace*, is very easy, because it is just a name of one flower. At least, we can know the poem is about a kind of flower.

Let us read his Red wheelbarrow. In this poem, he depicts with a happy tone three things: the red wheelbarrow, the rain and the white chicken. Common things in his eyes become very lovely. They have a kind of excitement, which seem to be a miracle. In fact, that is the beauty in his opinion—Eliot’s beauty, simply and cordial.

As a doctor, he should treat all kinds of illness very carefully. In order to cure the patients, he must seek truth from facts and face with the concrete conditions. In addition, in the field of literature, he takes Whitman as his teacher, and inherits from Whitman the traditional optimistic spirit. Everything in America can be described in the poems, and they are worth appreciating. After successfully saving a patient, he is very happy. It is just the humanitarianism that helps him to form his optimistic world outlook.

On the contrary, “*Design*” makes us confused. It has more than one meaning. We can explain this word as a picture, in fact it is a picture. But that is just the superficial meaning, we find the design which “govern in a thing so small”. Here, design means purpose, or order. We will ask what kind of the picture is, what does it mean, whose purpose it is, what on earth it will do... Obviously, the title itself is very complex, if we want to know what the exact content of the poem is, we must read the whole poem. It is so complicated that even the author himself, at the end of the poem, has to finish it with a rhetorical question—what but design of darkness to appal?

The complicity in the poem reflects the complicity in the author’s mind. When the author writes this poem, he is a man of fifty-two years old. As a sophisticated person, a senior citizen, he has formed his own attitude towards the world. Everything is not as simple as it appears, deep into it, there are still abstruse meanings. Moreover, he thinks that in the universe, there exists a kind of mysterious force which controls the world, but he cannot identify it, that is why he just leaves this problem for us in the end. The white things are only its embodiment; we should unveil them and get the real meaning.

Like Thomas Hardy, Frost formed the pessimistic world outlook. That is mostly due to his own life experience. Frost has suffered a lot during his whole life: At twelve, he loses his father, that is a great pain in his mind which never disappears; after his first poem is published, the others are rejected by the publishing houses, the hit is so serious that he has to leave for England to continue his poet’s career; his children—daughter and son, make a sudden death, that is another strike in his

heart. All these disasters turns him into another world which is different from that of William's. There is a deep-going change in his thinking method. The world is not as nice as it is used to be, the indifferent atmosphere surrounds him. He relation between people and nature is becoming tenser and tenser. The mysterious force controls human's fate. This kind of thought is reflected in the poem – *Design*.

Social background

The two poems are written in different years: *Queen Anne's lace* in 1921, and *Design* in 1936.

After the World War I, America has become a powerful leader. It begins its prosperous period. The industry develops with a high speed, and the products are very abundant. It is a period of rebel: youth are drunk all the time, and they are crazy for jazz; women shorten their hair, and starts to smoke... It is also a period of contradiction: the soldiers who bring glory to homeland are in unemployment; the industry develops but workers make strike; someone advocates enjoying life to one's heart's content; but others call to return to simple life... Most artists, especially novelists and poets' critics the current social phenomena, they lose hope for America.

In 1930's, America changes. It becomes mature. If 20's America is like a young man, it is in his middle age presently. The Great Depression informs it that it has many problems to resolve: social crime, youth's rebel, workers' strike, violent competition, and thread of war, What can we do? How can we do? People who are already used to the comfort life now can hardly understand: What is the trouble, who makes it? Frost meditates with us.

Why do they write

Once when asked what is the definition of poem, Frost answers: "Poem is what the poet writes." By giving this strange definition, he does not want to be learned and profound, he just wants to ask the readers to think about the poem: its title, its theme, and its meanings. The readers should do the above things by themselves. Of course, he does not mean to avoid the responsibility he should take. His duty is to lead the readers to find the deep meaning. At least, the reader can learn something about thinking method. He serves as a director who leads the readers in a dark forest, helping them to find the treasure.

The title, as we have discussed, needs reader to give his own understanding. The originally pure and innocent white things become evil. What is the reason? Readers should answer.

Williams has his unique thought about the identification of poem and poet. He insists that he write poems out of his own will. And he does not think he has to get the permission of the authority, such as T.S. Eliot. He shows great conception to Eliot's "international", gentle and flowery language. Instead, he praises highly the America local language, and believes the real valuable things come from the reality. He gets the inspiration from the common things of daily-life, then use simple words to portrait them, from which, he feels great happiness.

Queen-Anne's-Lace is a kind of common white flower, which can be seen everywhere. Because of the acute sense of eyesight, Williams finds the beauty of it. The weak little flower has so great power that the wild carrot cannot compete against it. He is deeply moved, the impulses force him to write down the out-coming words. Though violently against the theory of "imaginary", he practices it unintentionally. But he himself believe he write this poem just because he like it, and he like everything beautiful, that is enough.

How do they describe

The most unique feature of *Design* is paradox, which composes the whole poem. The traditional meanings of white—pure, faith, quite disappear. A series of white images take their places. "Fat and white" can let us think of the newborn baby, but in the poem, it is an ugly spider. "A white piece of satin cloth" maybe is taken from the clothing of a bride, but it is the rigid dead wings. The originally blue flower—the heal-all, which gives us the impression of a magic drug, turns to be

white. “Mixed ready to begin the morning right”, we probably hope there must be a delicious meal, but before us is “a witches’ broth”.

In the poem everything changes its meaning, and white things are the images of evil and death. Whiteness is an image of paradox—“black” white, which is more terrible than black.

Williams opposes making general statements or expressing abstract ideas in poetry, instead he thinks nothing cannot be taken as poem’s contents. The point is how to dig out the meaning---the answer is using imagination. He has said the only realism in art comes from imagination. “No idea but in things” means that the poet’s job is to deal with concrete particulars and let ideas take care of themselves. To understand the poems, the readers need imagination, and to write the poems, the author also needs imagination.

In *Queen-Anne’s-Lace*, we find the concrete images—flower and carrot, but we do not find how dose the flower defeat the carrot nor the concrete process. By using our imagination, we can reappear it at our will. That is the charm of the poem.

What are the Meanings

White in Frost’s eyes has lost its original meaning. We might ask why as Frost asks “what had that flower to do with being white, the wayside blue and innocent heal-all” As we have already known, he writes the poem in 1936 when there are many social problems which are more serious than before. Pondering these, he naturally wants a miraculous cure like the heal-all. But unfortunately, it becomes useless before the complex problem. The magic “blue” disappears, only “white” left. So white means pale and empty—without vigor, useless.

Frost is a traditional writer, and he always holds the thought that the former rural life is better than the urban modern life. The grotesque and gaudy society makes him maintain sharp vigilance. The conservative thought keeps him being cautious towards the white evil thing—avoids the disaster like killing of spider. So the white represents the destroying force.

At the same time, white also embodies a mysterious force in the universe, which has religious colors. The scene of a spider holding a moth on a flower is like a religious right, which makes great impression on readers’ mind. The mysterious element comes from the doubts—why there is ugly in beauty, evil in virtue, and false in truth; what is the real purpose of the force.

Just opposite to the meanings in *Design*, white in *Queen Anne’s-Lace* is the symbol of purity, civilization, justice, and hope. The wild carrot represents the uncivilized things and behaviors, such as crime, excessive drinking, which scramble for spheres of influence with the flower. The success of the flower reflects he still cherishes sincere hopes for the society. Although a single flower is tiny ad fable, they “stem one by one”, and each of them is in the shape of a hand, that suggests that a single person’s strength is limited, but if people organize, after great effort, they can achieve success. Moreover, Williams does not ignore the shortcoming—the purple mole on the hand. But that is not the main side of the question: compared with the wonderful achievements people get, it can be improved after all.

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