White Heat: Purity and Passion in Queen Anne's Lace

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In William Carlos Williams's poem “Queen Anne's Lace,” the author addresses the tensions between purity and passion. The poem describes an erotic experience and the effect an unnamed man's touch has on the purity of an unnamed woman's body. Using the colors white and purple as symbolic representations of purity and passion, Williams simultaneously constructs a duality and a codependence between them. There are two conflicting, but integral, readings of the poem. The first implies that passion subsumes purity, the second that the two depend upon each other for existence. To resolve the contradictions between the readings would be to ignore the depth of the poem, as both are essential to the meaning of the poem.

Queen Anne's Lace

Her body is not so white as anemone petals nor so smooth—nor so remote a thing. It is a field of the wild carrot taking the field by force; the grass does not rise above it. Here is no question of whiteness, white as can be, with a purple mole at the center of each flower. Each flower is a hand's span of her whiteness. Wherever his hand has lain there is a tiny purple blemish. Each part is a blossom under his touch to which the fibres of her being stem one by one, each to its end, until the whole field is a white desire, empty, a single stem, a cluster, flower by flower, a pious wish to whiteness gone over—or nothing.

—William Carlos Williams, 1925

Rich in metaphor, simple in language, mystifying in meaning—William Carlos Williams's poem “Queen Anne's Lace” dazzles with its depth. It toys with the conflict between the seemingly mutually exclusive qualities of purity and passion, symbolized by the colors white and purple. It simultaneously sets them against each other, and shows how fluid and interconnected the two can be, offering two concurrent and valid readings. To resolve the ambiguities in the poem would mean to choose one reading over another, and therefore to ignore half of the meaning in the poem. “Queen Anne’s Lace” finds its depth through the unresolved tension between its contradictory meanings and readings. To understand the poem fully, the contradictions must be accepted and not oversimplified.

“Queen Anne’s Lace” uses the metaphors of flowers to describe an erotic experience. It describes an unnamed woman's body and the way it changes as a result of the touch of an unnamed man. The poem divides easily into three conceptual sections, separated by the only non-enjambed lines of the poem. The first section depicts the woman's body using a negative definition—saying what she is not. The second section begins to say what she actually is, while the third details the effect the erotic experience with the man has on her body. Each of the section breaks fall at a shift in focus, going from a relatively simple polarization between Queen Anne’s Lace (symbolizing the woman's body) and anemone flowers, to a climactic, alchemical confusion. The poem uses the symbolic concepts of whiteness and purpleness to illustrate this process.

The colors white and purple hold nearly opposite connotations. White symbolizes purity, innocence, virginity, light, harmlessness, goodness and also emptiness. It has the connotations of being unstained and free from lust and passion. Purple, on the other hand, has much earthier associations. The color worn by royalty, it also symbolizes mourning, blood, and sin. It is bright and gaudy, and anything but pure. Symbolically, purple and white appear to be mutually exclusive. One cannot be both unstained and bloody, pure and sinful, or so the societally sanctioned definitions imply.

This dualism means that the more the woman in the poem is purple, the less she is white. Each “tiny purple blemish” (13) that the man’s touch causes diminishes her purity. “Blemish” is defined as a “defect or flaw; stain; blight,” so by definition these blemishes detract from her unstained quality. According to the dualistic symbolism that Williams employs, the woman's whiteness should gradually be overcome by purple as the poem progresses through the erotic experience it describes.

Oddly enough, the rest of the poem does not completely support this hypothesis. The woman in the poem is somehow simultaneously white and purple. Her whiteness and her purpleness intertwine and actually depend on
each other. Each purple blemish is the center of a white flower—the more blemishes, the more flowers. Her whiteness grows with his touch, until—in a climactic ending—everything becomes “a pious wish to whiteness” (20). The erotic experience related in the poem culminates in whiteness. In other words, whatever is being symbolized by her whiteness is not actually in opposition to her purpleness, and may in fact depend on it. Yet still that is too simple, as the poem actually ends in nothingness, suggesting that despite all the apparent collaboration between white and purple, they may in fact ultimately destroy each other.

The ambiguity surrounding whiteness continues throughout the poem, raising many questions. For example, what exactly does “white desire” (18) mean? White could be modifying desire. In this case it carries associations of spotlessness and purity, implying that passionate desire is not sinful. Also, it brings mind to white heat and blinding light—the searing white that can dissolve boundaries, much like erotic experiences do. Yet the phrase could conversely mean the desire for whiteness. It could be a wish for the purity lost through the purpling touch. While these two interpretations themselves conflict, in the context of a poem one need not be chosen over the other. In fact, the poem derives energy and depth from the tension between these opposites.

The two conflicting readings—one ending nihilistically, the other synergistically—carry through the entire poem. In the first reading, the woman’s sexual experience threatens her whiteness with purple blemishes. Although she is as “white as can be” (8), her whiteness is marred by the man’s touch—“wherever his hand has lain there is a tiny purple blemish” (11). In this light, the poem could be about loss of innocence and purity—perhaps the loss of virginity. The man’s touch gradually divides the woman’s body’s white purity into “hand’s span’s” (10), each with its purple spot. As the poem progresses, her whiteness is subsumed by the purple. Read this way, the line “a pious wish to whiteness gone over” (20) implies a wish for lost whiteness. As the line “white desire” (18) can also be read as meaning a desire for lost whiteness, one could argue a strong case for this reading.

This perspective gives the poem a note of sadness and regret. It almost feels hopeless, ending as it does in a fruitless wish and then nothingness. The violent tinge in the descriptions of the “tiny purple blemish” (13) caused by each touch of the man’s hand adds to this depressing tone. The images of the purple blemishes seem to both suggest that the woman’s moral “whiteness” is stained and that her body is physically blemished by the touch. It seems almost to be a description of rape. At the very least the lines hold an element of destruction and forcefulness. The violence in the image of the purple blemishes left by his hands echoes the violence in the description of the woman as “a field/of the wild carrot taking/the field by force” (3). The difference between the two is that in one the roughness lies within her, while in the other, it lies in the treatment of her. Both kinds of roughness contrast the delicacy of the anemone, underscoring the difference between this woman and the delicate, pure ideal. Both could be read as sad symbols of how damaged the woman’s “whiteness” is.

However, this is not a complete reading of what the poem is saying. Even though the woman differs from the ideal, being “not so white as/anemone petals nor so smooth—nor so remote a thing” (1) she is still white. She may be a “field/of the wild carrot taking/the field by force” (3)—rough and strong and earthy—but she is still white. She is “white as can be” (8), in fact—the epitome of whiteness. So it is not in the amount of whiteness that the difference between the woman and the ideal lies, but in the quality of the whiteness, or, perhaps, the expression of whiteness.

Hers is a complicated whiteness. The woman is not just “white as can be,” but “white as can be, with a purple mole/at the center of each flower” (8). She embodies both white and purple, holding this apparent contradiction in her very essence. And perhaps this is no contradiction—certainly the second reading of the poem would assert that. If each purple spot grows in the center of a white flower, then the more purple there is, the more white there is. The two depend upon each other.

In this case, “white desire” (18) means sexual desire that has the qualities of whiteness. Whiteness—i.e. purity—does not oppose sexuality. Even the climax can be read as a dissolution into whiteness. The “pious wish to whiteness” (20) is an ecstatic wish for what is already made real, not a regretful wishing for what has been lost through the expression of sexuality. Williams has twisted the polarity between passion and purity to the point where the greatest moment of purity corresponds with the greatest moment of passion. He has redefined purity. One can be earthy, strong, physical, rough, and sexual and still be pure. In fact, this purity comes about because of sexuality—the white flowers multiply along with the touch-caused purple spots. In this reading, the erotic experience dissolves the assumed oppositions, transforming everything into something else—perhaps even into nothing.

In the end, the reader is left with a choice: does the erotic experience bring about a positive transformation, synergistically converting disparate opposites into co-operative forces; or does it cause destruction, and ultimate dissolution into nothingness? The end of the poem presents both options openly, and leaves the dilemma unsettled. Perhaps both options can coexist. Perhaps everything can also be nothing, building can also be destroying, passion can also be purity. The very fact that both options are presented means that both exist within the world of the poem. One option need not be right. The challenge for the reader, then, is to bear the tension between these seemingly opposing scenarios without denying the existence of either. It is to develop what Keats called “negative capability”—the ability to live with conflict and mystery without needing to come quickly to a resolution. In this way, the meaning and wisdom of both readings can play upon the reader’s mind, and the poem—like the real world—does not need to be diminished or simplified in order to be fully experienced.