

Analysis poem on to brooklyn bridge by hart crane



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When I first read “ Proem: to Brooklyn Bridge,” by Hart Crane, I felt some difficulty in understanding the poem, but I wanted to probe its images and use of language to try to develop a better understanding of the poem. A reading of secondary sources informed me that the poem is actually the introduction or “ overture” to Crane’s epic poem “ The Bridge. ” (Williams)

That long poem or series of interconnected poems was conceived by Crane as both as an “ answer” to T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “ The Wasteland” and also an epic poem of America. “ Proem: to Brooklyn Bridge” introduces Crane’s central symbol, the Brooklyn Bridge, and reveals, through a succession of poetic visions the various poetic and symbolic aspects of the Bridge’s. The Bridge operates symbolically as an indicator of transcendent truth, a touchstone for American myth, and a plastic demonstration of the romantic urge Crane believes is inherent in humanity. “ To Brooklyn Bridge” operates technically on two main compositional techniques.

The first technique is symbolist, (notably after the example of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud), wherein objects (such as the Brooklyn Bridge) are revealed as indicators of other, unspecified quantities, emotions, or revelations. For example, the seagull in the poem’s opening stanza “ The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,/Shedding white rings of tumult, building high/Over the chained bay waters Liberty” indicates the surge of transcendental freedom, inherent in the exhilaration of art and poetry.

The seagull represents inspiration and spiritual exaltation, in fact operating as an “ invocation to the muses” to the extent that this single image sets the poem and the reader in flight. The subsequent “ dive” “—Till elevators drop

us from our day” results in a new symbolic idea: the use of a movie theater “ I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights/With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene” which symbolically evokes the inverse of the seagull symbol: the restriction of the mere senses, where the movie theater recalls Plato’s cave. The second dominant technique in “ To Brooklyn Bridge” is slightly more difficult to understand, but should probably be called religious or metaphysical. That is, the use of image, symbol, metaphor and also meter in the poem are meant to indicate spiritual and religious urges that have been hitherto undiscovered by means of ordinary perception and expression.

This mode manifests itself via the poem’s obvious religious imagery in stanzas 7-11, but also propels the sense of nobility and aspiration throughout the poem’s entirety. The fact that “ To Brooklyn Bridge” meets the printed page, italicized throughout, also promotes the motion and urgency of an invocation or prayer. The meter of, ‘ To Brooklyn Bridge” presents eleven blank-verse quatrains. This form fosters a formal, deliberate atmosphere while avoiding the predictability of a regular rhyme-scheme or the loose feeling of free-verse.

Against this blank-verse form, Crane uses brilliant variations in meter: “ A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,” “ A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene,” as well as compressed diction: “ Of anonymity time cannot raise;” “ Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,” and stunning imagery; “ Under thy shadows by the piers I waited;/Only in darkness is thy shadow clear. ” Along with the symbolist, metaphysical, and prosodic modes mentioned above, “ To

Brooklyn Bridge” also has a personal or confessional mode which continues throughout the duration of “ The Bridge. ” This confessional mode grounds the poem in lyric articulation, coupled with a non-linear narrative “ plot” which begins in “ To Brooklyn Bridge” and ends in the closing poem of “ The Bridge: “ Atlantis. ” It is the personal mode which provides the poem’s turning point “ Under thy shadow by the piers I waited,” when the narrative aspects of the poem suddenly become personal and confessional.

Crane’s intention was to make the Brooklyn Bridge immediately identifiable at the opening of his “ epic” poem with many symbolic ideas succeeds not only by virtue of his technical expertise but in the logic of the poem, which begins in the image of the free flying seagull and ends in the lines: “ Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend/And of the curveship lend a myth to God. ” I think that the meaning of this poem is best approached through the ending lines, where it is clear that Crane has been speaking of humanity’s search for spiritual and religious meaning in their lives.

As mankind could build the Brooklyn Bridge in physical space, Crane seems to be saying that mankind can build the same kind of “ bridge” in their spiritual life to find a connection to God. Because Crane never states these poetic themes explicitly but leaves them for the reader to discover themselves, the act of reading and studying Crane’s lines can be thought of as another type of “ bridge” where learning the meaning of the poem is “ walking across” the bridge to a new kind of knowledge.

The poem begins and ends with an arc of flight which I believe stands for spiritual impulses and ends with an uncertain sense of religious prayer.

Uncertainty expressed in lines like “ And as obscure as that heaven of the Jews” — make it clear that Crane is willing to accept uncertainty and is a demonstration of his poetic faith. Or at least that is my feeling about some of the more obscure lines in this poem. I think Crane spent more time on composing his poetry than the average poet and this dedication shows in how deeply the poem resonates.

The more I read the poem, the more ideas and images seemed to come out of it and this was like looking into the sea from a great height, like standing on a bridge, so after many readings I felt the poem began to take on added dimensions and characteristics that weren't apparent to me at first. On the whole I find this poem to be beautiful though complicated and not easily understood. The problem with the poem is Crane's use of odd or uncommon words and his use of complicated imagery and metaphor. Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge” may be the introductory poem to a larger epic, but it is a challenging poem to the reader in itself. My understanding of the poem increased as I read and re-read the lines and read a small amount of secondary sources and criticism. It is well-worth spending time to penetrate Crane's difficult style to gain insight into his meaning, which, overall, is a positive and life-affirming vision.

In “ Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge,” Crane combined various techniques in his poem: symbolist, metaphysical, blank-verse— and narrative form into the powerful symbol of the Brooklyn Bridge as the link between humanity and God (or eternity)— providing an expression in poetry of the likewise physical components of the actual Brooklyn Bridge itself. Perhaps I am reading too much into the poem, but Crane's style almost encourages the reader to

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probe as deeply as possible all of the possible meanings and thoughts behind his words and images.

Proem: "To Brooklyn Bridge," is a powerful poem and a good introduction to Crane's epic "The Bridge". Some critics call it as a masterpiece of poetic composition notable not only for its marvelous symbolism and imagery but for the greatness of its techniques as well as for its originality, thematic range, and emotional resonance. (Hazo) In reading the poem numerous times I would say that I agree with these esteemed opinions although it took more time and effort to begin to understand Crane's work than it usually does for me when reading a poet for the first time.