

New Criticism:

1) ID complexities 2) ID unifying forces 3) Describe how details (elements) are resolved

THE YOUNG HOUSEWIFE - William Carlos Williams

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband's house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

- First figure - young, housewife, "moves [freely] about in negligee", yet emphasis of "housewife" ownership of house implies some sense of confinement; are walls elements of safety, privacy, or prison?
- Juxtaposition of second figure with no explicit connection, though as speaker seems to know what goes on behind walls. Gender?

- Repetition - unstated, driver also repeating. Calling of various men, attention to her dress emphasizes both looseness (i.e. "uncorseted") and some impulse to contain - tucking in hair.
- Shyness imputed, not observable any more than her motion behind walls.
- In place of solitude, speaker claims right/luxury of comparing her (i.e. perhaps poeticizing her). Fallen leaf - implied simile is at odds with youthful, shy, suddenly figure. Should be compared to a bud, new flower...

- Objective tone, describes actual leaves being crushed (wheels noiseless/leaves crackling) and in contrast to the quasi-sexual violence of this third "pass", speaker claims a mannered, even gentlemanly behavior.

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Tensions: walls separate two figures despite a willed connection; propriety separates someone else's wife and the solitary (male) driver

Unifiers: parallel motion

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Tension: housewife not seeking speaker;

Unifier: emergence, breaking the walls; seeking of other men; act of comparison itself, a bringing together in the mind

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Tension: silence/sound; desire destruction

Unifier: paradox of a figurative if impossible intercourse between leaf and car; continuous motion associated with male/car/machine makes possible a possession?

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- Objective tone, describes actual leaves being crushed (wheels noiseless/leaves crackling) and in contrast to the quasi-sexual violence of this third "pass", speaker claims a mannered, even gentlemanly (and gendered) behavior.

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Metaphors and similes function by bringing together unlike terms. "The Young Housewife" explores the drama of a seemingly impossible (and at least socially inappropriate) desire, which is figuratively satisfied in the mind of the speaker by bringing together substitutes--in an explicitly poetic gesture.

The constant of motion is established in the first stanza of the poem, which emphasizes a woman contained by her marital status and the walls of a house which are not hers, the man by a car and his solitude. Their separation is emphasized by the succinctness of the fourth line. The description of the woman's dress and the implicit voyeurism and solitude establish the speaker's desire.

The woman's appearance outside the house, calling to men, and the speaker's notation of intimate details begin to close the gap. This exposure prompts a figurative advance; he ventures a comparison: she is like a fallen leaf. The tension is not entirely resolved by this claiming and naming because of the oddness of the figure, which associates her with a fallen leaf--symbolic perhaps of the fall from Eden. Does it imply her availability or a decrease in her desirability (as if calling the ice-man sullies her innocence)?

The thrust of the poem's motion resumes however in the final lines as the speaker's desire is delegated (metonymically) to the car wheels which crush the leaves. Transmuting the young and desired woman into a dried leaf allows the speaker to master his desire by rendering the object both possessed and no longer worthy of possession--with a "properly" restrained bow and smile.

