

Joanne Seautelle

Mrs. Jennifer Pust

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An Unfulfilled Journey:

Four Poems by James Wright

Concrete images and simple, strong words: the poems of James Wright express pain and longing in short, graphic ways. These four poems acknowledge the beauty and power of nature, and the general helplessness and the many opportunities that humans waste. His outlook is bleak, yet not hopeless, as nature somehow still finds a way to go on despite human mistakes.

Often, Wright uses short, clipped lines and short stanzas to communicate ideas, which gives his poems a fragmented, uneasy feeling. In “You and I Saw Hawks Exchanging the Prey,” Wright creates a creepy tone as the two human observers watch the hawks at work:

He plucked a gray field mouse
Suddenly in the wind.

The small dead fly alive
Helplessly in his beak,

His cold pride, helpless.
All she receives is life.

They are terrified. They touch.
Life is too much.

The simple words, “His cold pride, helpless” contrasted with “Life is too much” shows Wright’s idea that the beauty and power of life is sometimes even too much for the elements of nature to handle (Wright, “You and I”). Wright similarly expresses the feeling that life is to be

treasured and valued, even if we don't exactly know how, in "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," when Wright describes the beauty of "the bronze butterfly, / Asleep on the black trunk," and concludes the exploration of the nature the speaker observes with "I have wasted my life" (Wright, "Lying in a Hammock"). Again, Wright uses simple words, "bronze," "asleep," "wasted" to convey the longing and sadness the speaker feels as he is overwhelmed by the power of nature around him.

This longing and sadness echoes in varying ways through these four poems, and always through bold, often single-syllable words, as seen again in "Outside Fargo, North Dakota," when Wright describes, "I strike a match slowly and lift it slowly. / No wind." The repetition of "slowly" and the short fragment, "No wind" underscores the loneliness of the setting, a loneliness that pervades Wright's poetry (Wright, "Outside Fargo"). To me, the saddest of the four poems was not in William Duffy's Farm where the speaker decides "I have wasted my life," but the abject hopelessness of "In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned," another long-titled poem that expresses setting, character, and tone before the poem even begins. The speaker observes of the women who work in the whorehouse, "I do not know how it was / They could drown every evening. / What time near dawn did they climb up the other shore, / Drying their wings?" and in doing so, acknowledges that these women, spurned by society, have a natural beauty--though men make them "drown every evening" they then near dawn are "drying their wings" like birds or possibly even angels (Wright, "In Response to a Rumor"). These women that the speaker sees as beautiful and renewing are similarly isolated and cut off from the society around them, again showing the

terrible loneliness that humans create for each other when relationships are out of balance with nature and kindness.

This group of poems by James Wright illustrates a bleak view of life--a lonely time, in the Midwest states, often of a man misunderstood and a life unfulfilled: the speaker sees beauty but doesn't know what to do with it, how to integrate it into his own life, how to appreciate and feel the wonder of nature around him and share that beauty with others in a way that might make life better for everyone. Instead, the speaker is cut off, isolated by short words and small lines, separate from relationships and community, an artist who can paint a scene but not enjoy the work. James Wright won many poetry awards, including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, yet suffered tremendous grief and loneliness and resorted to alcoholism instead of nurturing love ("James Wright (poet)"). He leaves us his art and his pain, turning his own unfulfilled journey into poems that we can tap into to share the occasional futility we feel and pain we experience--but for all our sakes, I hope we can not just recognize and capture beauty as Wright does, but learn to live in and with the beauty around us.

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