Competing Forms of Representation and the Figure of the Orphan in William Carlos Williams's Depression-Era Passaic

"The finest short stories are those that raise, in short, one particular man or woman from that Gehenna, the newspapers, where at last all men are equal, to the distinction of being an individual. To be responsive not to the ordinances of the herd (Russia-like) but to the extraordinary responsibility of being a person" (*Selected Essays* 297).

"The poet judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing." –Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass* (9).

"The world's an orphan's home." – Marianne Moore, "In Distrust of Merits" (137).

In *Life Along the Passaic*, William Carlos Williams uses the discrepancy between realism and modernism (or between the reality of experience and the representation of it) to diagnose the illness of his culture and show the plight of individuals during the Depression through the metaphor of the orphan. In addition, figurations of family, both positive and negative, offer an imaginative survey of possibilities and pitfalls for remedying the plight of the orphan. The figurations of family are not offered as a cure or consolation for loss but instead as representations of the ways individuals counteract or cope with loss and poverty. The signs of personal dignity and creativity that permeate Williams's collection of stories also testify to the capacity and culture of marginalized people. These signs of accomplishment and individuality are all the more admirable for existing in the face of being cut off, or orphaned, from beneficial resources that ought to be available. Williams's narrative map of Passaic reveals how such accomplishments help people cope with the losses figured by orphanhood.

In the first (and eponymous) story of *Life Along the Passaic*, William Carlos Williams draws the reader into his fictive world by following the contours of the Passaic River and a variety of human activities in relation to it. The syntax of the opening sentence pays homage to the landscape by imitating the river's drift, but it also carefully establishes the urban setting of

the collection by calling attention to the factory on the river as well as the children playing along the river's banks. The visual appeal of the first sentence has a cinematic quality, zooming in on "a spot of a canoe filled by the small boy who no doubt made it." Williams also includes a soundtrack to his "midstream" portrait, alluding to "a sound of work going on there" from the Manhattan Rubber Co. By carefully situating his reader in this densely figured world, Williams sets the stage for the participant-observer ethos of much of his collection and conjures a vivid reality.[1] In Robert Gish's words, "the narrator . . . is so moved to empathy that he passes beyond voyeur to participant through the telling and retelling of their lives" (66). At the same time, in the very next paragraph, Williams reminds his readers of the mediated quality of his portrait by focusing on the children's cry of "Paper!" (109). In doing so, Williams joins his commitment to a local, historicized realism to his sense of the complexity of representation. By wedding a realist aesthetic to a modernist sensibility in the opening scenes of this first story in the collection, Williams invites his readers both to experience the world of Passaic, New Jersey, first-hand and to notice his artistic mediations of that world. The thrilling array of perspectives and voices that fill out the rest of "Life Along the Passaic" function like an overture, alerting the reader to the polyphonic diversity of Passaic, and putting her on notice that subsequent scenes will require the critical double-consciousness of a participant-observer.

---

[1] Joshua Schuster has argued for the relevance of the anthropology of Franz Boas to Williams's *Spring and All*. He claims that, while it is unclear that Williams read Boas, "Boas's stress on environmental factors in conditioning bodies and behaviors led him to view culture as context-dependent and site-specific — exactly what Williams would call 'the local phase of the game of writing' (*Essays* 29)" (121). He also points out that "What first set Boas apart from the previous generation of American anthropologists was his adamant promotion of the participant-observer method. He stressed keeping an open mind to gather original data while bracketing one's own cultural preconceptions." (120).

"Life along the Passaic" immediately beckons its reader to enter the picture space of the cityscape it creates. It does this both through an attractive visual appeal to the reader and a welcoming narrative voice that invites the reader to share his perspective. The story also draws readers in by casting them quickly into unmarked dialogue between the narrator and the hitchhiker he picks up (*Stories* 110). Subsequent dialogue is indeterminate enough that it can be construed as either a direct address to the reader (and hence an "interpellation" of the reader?) or an internal dialogue which the narrator holds with himself. The panoramic arrangement of the story plunges the reader into a narrative stream of images that mimics the activity of the boy in the canoe, the opening scene of the story. Echoing the swimming references by the hitchhiker and later by the narrator (*Stories* 111), the story immerses the reader in the river-like interactions among the people whom the narrator sees on the Passaic River's shore as he drives along. This figurative river of images continues to flow through the mind of the narrator and to move through physical space in the shift to the autopsy table in the hospital. As the first story in the collection, "Life Along the Passaic" launches the reader into the social and psychological spaces of Passaic as they are portrayed in the entire volume, introducing us to the conflicts and concerns of the largely immigrant community that figures so prominently in many of the best stories.

But why does Williams double the "plot" of his story with the reader's experience of it in this manner? By foregrounding the act of representation, Williams challenges his readers to determine for themselves the significance of the stakes involved in representing the experience of the population he describes. His writing attests to the worth of people that not even his narrators notice at first. The stories in his collection offer a cognitive or narrative map of Passaic, New Jersey (Rozendal 148), one which can be read against actual city maps of the period (see appendix), but which also functions as an alternative to perhaps more official but less

comprehensive or sympathetic representations of the city. In an unpublished introduction he prepared for "the first New Directions edition of *The Farmers' Daughters* (1961)" (Witemeyer, "Unpublished Introduction" 1), Williams offers another perspective on this ambition to map his local community:

> The anonymous nature of a small city's streets have always been close to my heart which the metropolis multiplies, losing itself until it returns to the namelessness of the streets of the big city with its government buildings, it s [sic] museums and its houses of worship. But if I see passing my house, unnamed, an old woman, with heavy poorly fitting glasses, bare headed in the September heat, limping from her arthritis but dragging some sort of vehicle behind her, I am touched. No sign passes between us but I recognize the situation into which we are all plunged up to our necks and over them. It brings me closer to the men and women and children with whom I am surrounded.
>
> I find that the short stories I wrote reflected those people and it is not surprising that when I was citing a situation it will be something of that sort that I found myself intent upon depicting" (Witemeyer, "Unpublished Introduction" 7).

When Williams recognizes "the situation into which we are all plunged up to our necks and over them," he figures the social sphere and its problems as a body of water like the Passaic river, and his passionate immersion in this "situation" could eventuate in either a drowning or a baptism.[2] Like his poem "The Forgotten City" (published in *The Wedge*, 1944) the stories of *Life Along the Passaic* call attention to a blind spot of the nation's imagination, putting an unsuspected place

[2] As a potential baptism, the phrase corresponds to the poet's baptism in the filthy Passaic in "The Wanderer" (*Collected Poems* 1: 115-116).

and invisible population "("this / curious and industrious people") on his reader's' mental map by asking,

> How did they get
> Cut off this way from representation in our
> newspapers and other means of publicity
> when so near the metropolis, so closely
> surrounded by the familiar and the famous? (*Collected Poems* 2: 86-87).

As Williams's enjambment neatly shows, the social non-existence of these people is the result of being "Cut off," an idea that corresponds with a key meaning of orphanhood, the state of being deprived of advantages or status ("Orphan"). In this conception, poverty is an imposition or violation rather than an essential quality, the effect of being cut off from resources to which only others have access. Williams's passerby embodies what Michel de Certeau calls "lived space," in which the "intertwined paths" of the woman and Williams watching her "give their shape to spaces" around them (153). This fluidity is alive, "a way of being in the world" that a mere map could not account for because it substitutes the trace of lived movement "for the practice" of it in order to "transform action into legibility" (154). Throughout *Life Along the Passaic*, Williams seeks to portray the "way of being in the world" embodied by his passersby on its own terms, without imposing a form of legibility that skews or masters it.

Williams's method is to offer representations that render visible such processes, such "ways of being." An example from the first story of his collection shows what I mean. According to Emily Mitchell Wallace's bibliography, Williams first published "Life Along the Passaic" in the January 1934 issue of *The Magazine* (191), and the story squarely situates the book in which it first appeared in the era of the Great Depression. Despite the prejudicial

descriptors which appear in it, the following excerpt shows Williams's ambition to represent his community in a way that puts it on the map of a larger context and consciousness. "All the streets of the Dundee section of Passaic," his narrator reports, "have men idling in them this summer. Polacks mostly, walking around . . . . You see a few niggers, but they're smiling. Jews, of course, trying to undersell somebody else or each other and so out of the picture. But the Polacks look stunned, mixed up, don't know what it's all about. Not even enough coin to get drunk on. They'll do for the whole bunch" (*Stories* 111). While Joseph Entin is no doubt right in taking Williams's narrator to task for his racial slurs in this passage (95), he also misses some of its sociopolitical significance. The narrator's insistence here that "they'll do for the whole bunch" may sound oversimplifying, but the historian David J. Goldberg's characterization of the same area that Williams writes about suggests there is some precision to it. Although Goldberg writes about Passaic during the period from 1916 to 1921 in the following passage, his remarks about the Dundee district are nonetheless relevant to what Williams says about it in the Depression setting of "Life Along the Passaic":

> Dundee, which was really a city unto itself, comprised the poorest and most congested part of the immigrant quarter. Located on a narrow strip of land between a canal and the Passaic River, this district was home to many of the city's mills and to most of the Magyar and Slavic residents. Besides crowded housing conditions, residents also had to endure the stink of chemicals dumped into the river. Nevertheless, life in such a district had its compensations as within its borders, immigrants drank, shopped, prayed, and socialized together. Especially on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, its streets came alive as residents sought relief from the daily grind of mill work. (54-55)

Readers familiar with the other stories in Williams's collection will recognize many of the Slavic residents to which Goldberg refers. *Life Along the Passaic* finds this quarter of the city worthy of attention in its own right, despite being polluted and marred by irresponsible industry and economic inequality.

In his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman writes that "The poet judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" (9). While Williams's narrators certainly make judgments about the people and events they describe, Whitman's metaphor nevertheless seems relevant to these stories, both because they throw a candid unsentimental light on their subjects and because sunlight, while it may pose a threat to individuals who lack shelter, also nourishes and warms the world. In this respect, Williams' "narrative sunlight" imaginatively counteracts the depredations to which it testifies. By introducing the figure of the orphan as a central one in his lead story, moreover, Williams invites us to notice and value the unprotected or uncared for people throughout the stories in this collection. This includes infants and children, of course, but also vulnerable and marginalized adults.[3] Williams alludes twice to orphans, once near the beginning of the story when describing Passaic children ("Blind, crippled, orphaned. Classroom perverts driving the teacher mad" [*Stories* 110]) and again at the very end of the story when characterizing "the kids" of Passaic as being "like the four orphans from the asylum—in the dark and storm—when they saw the railroad tracks undermined" (*Stories* 116). As part of his commitment to the plight of the "orphaned" people of Passaic, Williams shows the things happening by daylight, but he also marks the limits of his narrative sunlight: "It's all right

[3] J.E. Slate argues that "in all Williams' fiction . . . children and childish adults represent modern or American man" (164). In addition, a striking number of stories in *Life Along the Passaic* focus on childbirth and children. Examples include the account of childbirth in "A Night in June," the young suicide pregnant with twins in "Life along the Passaic," the sick or dying infants in "The Girl with a Pimply Face," "Jean Beicke," "A Face of Stone," "The Accident," "Danse Pseudomacabre," and "World's End."

in the sun," he writes, "but the sun can't do everything. It can't make up for what's past. Even the kid in the boat, when he comes in, take a look at him. He's sun-burned all right; but the shape of his head is funny, his chest's too high, and he's got that old look to his face you see sometimes" (*Stories* 112).

The narrative techniques of the stories have a design upon the reader, then, of spotlighting or calling attention to the unsuspected grace, beauty, wisdom, and integrity of the people they depict. This can happen through imagery, as in the descriptions of sunlight and the physical and personal qualities they reveal when they fall upon the various people of Passaic (including the anatomy of the autopsy table in the first story of the collection). It can also happen through collage-like juxtapositions (especially in "World's End") or dramatic peripeties which throw significant contrasts into relief (as in the different attitudes adopted by the doctors toward the family in "Girl with a Pimply Face"). The swift shifts in perspective, especially in the closing and opening stories, give rise to a kind of aesthetic vertigo, disorienting readers by confusing them as to who is speaking and what the scene may be, but also thrilling them by throwing them into vibrant worlds of activity and dialogue, and finally challenging them to focus on the plight of the deprived (of either money or love) and the courage and creativity with which they cope with their situations.

The subtle but steady reminders throughout "Life Along the Passaic" that we are readers of created scenes rather than mere witnesses of unfolding events push us to recognize Williams's engagement with the people and places he is depicting throughout *Life Along the Passaic*. The cries of "Paper!" by the boys selling newspapers (*Stories* 109), the men waiting at "the Y.M." to be photographed (for identity papers to grant legal status and permit them to work or participate in civic life?) (*Stories* 110), the comparison of a man on the street to "the usual bum in the

vaudeville shows" (*Stories* 111), the behavior or deprivation interpreted by Williams's narrator ("It's written all over them") and the anatomy of the pregnant suicide on the autopsy table (*Stories* 113), the date inscribed on the coin found along the river (*Stories* 116), and the closing reference to comic strips (*Stories* 116) all suggest that Williams offers his story as one more representation beside other portrayals of Passaic. At the same time, the reference to the hat-handicraft of the manual laborers and the heroism of the orphans that close the story both seem to be positive signs, one of artful individuality and the other of determination (*Stories* 116), the "knack of survival" that Williams admires in his prose and poetic portraits.

Why does Williams make such references to representations throughout *Life Along the Passaic*? The end of the first story seems significant in trying to answer this question. The last paragraph of the story refers to a homemade flourish on the hats of young male workers. This decoration includes a "scollop around the edges" as well as "airholes, stars, circles and all that." Then the story shifts to the plight of children in contrast to "the older men . . . who may be getting the breaks after all" (*Stories* 116). The very last reference to "the four orphans from the asylum" who ran out into the storm "when they saw the railroad tracks undermined" to save an approaching train from disaster offers an important image that, as I have already stated, seems vital to Williams's book as a whole. These orphans figure the plight of many during the Depression, representing not only children without means or parents during that era but also, more broadly, an entire disfranchised sector of society, adult as well as juvenile. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers this relevant figurative meaning of orphan: "A person or thing deprived of protection, advantages, benefits, or happiness previously enjoyed; something which has been abandoned or ignored" ("Orphan"). This sense apparently derives from the secondary meanings of the post-classical Latin root *orphanus*, defined as "bereaved, deprived of protection,

advantages." One of the meanings of the Indo-European root from which the English word *orphan* derives, that of being "deprived of free status" (orbh-), overlaps with the Latin etymology, but it helps show even better than the Latin derivation how the orphan metaphor can encompass adult as well as juvenile victims of social injustice, making my epigraph by Marianne Moore ("The world's an orphan's home") especially relevant to Williams's Depression-era stories as a whole. *Life Along the Passaic* raises questions about what forms of freedom and resources the people of Passaic lack and what deprives them of those freedoms and resources.

Moreover, the orphans in the complex comparison that closes "Life Along the Passaic" might remind some readers of the "babes in the woods" ballad (especially after the reference to "the Babe" in the subsequent sentence), an association emphasizing the dilemma of orphans in a world which benefits from their initiative but which does not sponsor them properly. Calling their request to see Babe Ruth "Cuckoo as a funny strip," but adding, "at that it's not so funny," the narrator's comparison suggests that the boys' ideal reward is, like the search for coins described in the story's penultimate paragraph, a kind of fool's gold. Like reading a comic strip, watching Babe Ruth hit a home run is entertaining, but not necessarily educative or sustaining—or even adequate as a reward for the boys' quite adult act of bravery. In that regard, the remark points out the absurdity of the boys' wishes in the context of their situation. News coverage of the real event to which Williams evidently alludes (despite a discrepancy in the number of orphans involved) sheds light on the narrator's attitude, for, as the *New York Times* reported in a front-page story on May 4, 1933, the orphan boys saved 500 passengers from injury or death by alerting the conductor to avoid a train wreck ("Orphan Boys Save Train From Washout in Storm"). Here is an account of the event as it appeared in the May 15, 1933 issue of *Time* magazine:

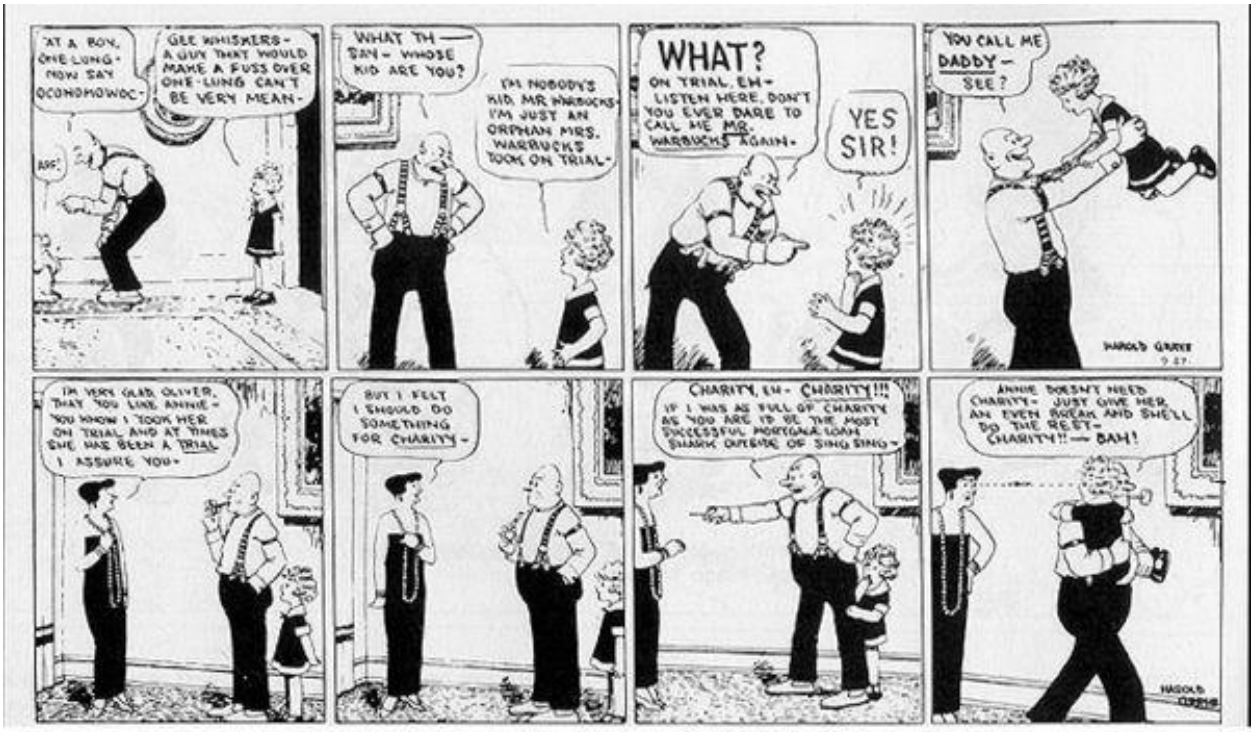
Early one evening last week a heavy rainstorm drenched New Jersey. At the Passaic Home & Orphan Asylum, six boys —Jacob Merlnizek, John Murdock, Douglas Fleming, Rudolph Borsche' Frank & Michael Mazzola, all between 11 and 15—were worried. Maybe their baseball field was washing away. They cunningly approached their matron. Didn't she want to know if the rain had damaged her garden? She did. She said they might go out if they were careful to put on raincoats and rubbers. A quick look at the garden showed that it was all right. Closer inspection of the baseball diamond, where they played with worn-out canvas gloves and three damaged bats, was equally reassuring. Then the boys saw something else. A washout had completely carried away the ballast from under a section of track on the nearby Erie R. R. right-of-way! Aware that an 8:10 commuting train was soon due, the boys pulled off their raincoats, ran down the track waving them wildly. The engineer said that if the boys had not been spry they would have been killed as he jerked his train to a stop, saving the lives of 500 passengers. The grateful Erie promised a handsome award to the young Passaic heroes. The Mayor & Commissioners of Passaic planned to strike medals in their honor. Photographers and reporters flocked to the asylum. Was there anything they particularly wanted done? Yes. said the boys. Just make sure Babe Ruth heard about them. Following Saturday, Passaic's small heroes met some of their big heroes at the circus in Manhattan. Clyde Beatty, tamer of lions and tigers, shook their hands and gave autographs. Hugo Zacchini, the human cannonball, greeted them. Gene Tunney came over to say hello. Max Schmeling invited them to his training camp at Oak Ridge, N. J. Babe Ruth, who sent each boy a telegram,

> will have them up to the Yankee Stadium soon, promises to try and knock a home-run in their honor. ("Heroes: Six Orphans")

"Life Along the Passaic" offers a picture of the city and its residents that competes with other forms of representation, including but not limited to the news items about the orphan boys or period maps of the city (the latter of which Williams partially outlines in the itinerary and place-references of his story). Williams's narrator refrains from the *Time* item's clever rhetoric ("Passaic's small heroes met some of their big heroes") and melodramatic or arch qualities ("They cunningly approached their matron. Didn't she want to know if the rain had damaged her garden?" and "The grateful Erie promised a handsome award"). In Williams's somewhat offhand reference, the orphans function as a symbol, representing the predicament of poor Passaic children in general ("The kids will run out *like* the four orphans from the asylum" [*Stories* 116]). The end of "Life Along the Passaic" imitates the situation of the orphans by stranding its readers in an uncertain world.

The abrupt switch with which Williams ends his own story situates the orphan anecdote alongside the mass-culture form of the comic strip, perhaps to show how the narrator's emblem of the orphan resists the conventions not only of news items but also of comic strips such as *Little Orphan Annie* (and the copycat strip, *Little Annie Rooney*). "In 1931," writes Bruce Smith, "*Little Orphan Annie* was far and away the single most popular comic strip in the New York *News*, and in many of the other papers in which it appeared" (29). The stories in Williams's collection actively oppose the rags-to-riches mythology of Annie's being adopted by the millionaire "Daddy" Warbucks and the melodrama of her subsequent adventures (during the Depression, for example, Gray portrayed Warbucks as losing his fortune and going on the road to work for a living with Annie. Separation and reunion become the basic plot pattern of the

strip during this period.) In "Life Along the Passaic" Williams seeks to distinguish the actual conditions of the Passaic orphans from the fantasies and fairy-tales of *Little Orphan Annie* and other comic-strips. Nevertheless, the situation of the children of Passaic may not be wholly different from that of fictive characters like Annie.



Little Orphan Annie by Harold Gray © 1924 The Chicago Tribune

In a 1924 strip, for instance, Annie explains to her new ward Oliver Warbucks that she has been taken in "on trial." The old man responds by chiding Annie, insisting that she replace her formal "sir" with "Daddy" when addressing him, but in another strip Warbucks' wife explains to him that "You know I took her on trial and at times she has been a trial I assure you." This wordplay reflects Annie's precarious status within the Warbucks' household, a status which Harold Gray, the inventor of the strip, would make much of in subsequent plot developments. Williams's orphans don't have the benefit of being fostered like Annie sometimes is, yet they are still tested like she is by the trials of adversity, a harsh reality which

Williams's mode of storytelling underscores. At the same time, his methods of representation manage to put an equal emphasis on the accomplishments and resourceful creativity of the world's orphans.

A new emphasis on adventure and intrigue developed in the comic strips of the 1930s, and Williams seems to engage this genre with his own contesting perspective. As Ron Goulart points out in *The Adventurous Decade*,

> The basic ingredients of Mary Pickford's films and character engendered . . . a good many kid adventure strips from the 1920s onward. . . . So gradually a new sort of kid character took to the comic pages, a kid who owed something to the Horatio Alger tradition, something to the newer pulp-adventure magazines, and a good deal to the movies of Mary Pickford and Jackie Coogan. These serious, or at least semi-serious, strips were of two basic kinds,: those utilizing waifs and orphans, and those given to the feats of heroic young boys. . . . . The all-time champion of the waifs is Little Orphan Annie. (140)

The political conservatism and black-and-white morality of Harold Gray's storytelling is at odds with the perspectives expressed by Williams's doctor-narrators in "Life Along the Passaic," "The Girl with a Pimply Face," "A Face of Stone," and especially "Jean "Beicke."[4] So is the mythology of Horatio Alger, which Arthur Asa Berger associates with *Little Orphan Annie*'s origins in the Coolidge era: "Introduced at a time when 'the business of America is business' was the prevailing social philosophy, it was only logical that the hero of the strip should be a benevolent capitalist" (80). Although Williams admires the pluck of his socially marginal characters, he usually refrains from didacticism. By contrast, "Gray's real heroes," writes

[4] "Annie first took on a detectable conservative coloration in the 1930's, revealing Gray's antipathy to gas rationing, income tax, labor, Communism, left wingers, and welfare" (Robinson 89).

Richard Marschall, "were members of the *petite bourgeoisie*—shopkeepers, farmers, modest entrepreneurs, and sometimes factory workers. Union members were usually depicted as indolent types seeking security, and their appearance allowed Gray to preach about self-reliance and the dignity of artisans through diverse voices—including his own captions, the observations of Annie and others, and the self-indicting words of the unfortunate creatures" (179).[5] While Harold Gray's fans could recognize something of their own experience through Annie's empty eyes (Harvey 103; Rhoads 354-355), others found them blind to the structural inequalities of capitalism.

In light of Williams's closing characterization of the orphan's request in terms of its contrast with their need ("But at that it's not so funny"), the early newspaper cartoon *The Yellow Kid* may also be relevant. It portrays an impoverished children's world as aggressive and grotesque, and Berger points out that "The kids in *The Yellow Kid* are abandoned—left to their own devices by parents presumably too busy, or too tired, to look after them." (33). The theme of abandonment seems indirectly relevant to the ending of "Life Along the Passaic," but it is quite explicit in "Jean Beicke." By contrast, another strip more contemporary to the period of Williams's story, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, visualizes a world where scrappy children constantly "kid" their parents through rebellious pranks for which they are routinely punished. Their behavior matches that of Williams's "Classroom perverts driving the teacher mad" and "Objecting to being called out of their names" in "Life Along the Passaic" (110). These characterizations square with the spunky heroes of "The Girl with a Pimply Face" and Jack O'Brien in "Under the Greenwood Tree."

[5] Auster's statistical analysis of strips from 1925-1950 confirms Gray's bias in favor of middle class over working class characters.

As Goulart and others point out, however, the "funny strips" made a turn toward epic adventures in the 1930s, so the objection to the moniker "funny" as part of Williams's satire pertains to that real-world contemporary fact as well. In 1931, for example, Chester Gould's comic strip *Dick Tracy* also first appeared, initiating a vogue for crime strips throughout the 1930s (Walker 226; 232-237). Like *Little Orphan Annie*, it depicted a dark world of corruption and gangster activity that Williams also alludes to in "Life Along the Passaic" when he refers to dead bodies dumped in the river (and later in the nurse's story in "The Cold World"):

> Nobody knows who they were. Dumb all right. But there's no kidding even about a couple of dead punks when you can't find out who did it—so's to send their kids to college. Sure. What are they gonna do? Somebody's got to put up a fight and break into the rich racket. It can't always be the same guys. Somebody's got to get the good screws. They ain't nobody's suckers (*Stories* 114).

Williams's speaker takes up the tough-guy rhetoric of gangster films and *Dick Tracy* here, but earlier (after the scene of the pregnant suicide) the narrator eschews or at least questions the brutal mentality of the mafia wise guy: "It's all right to be wise, but you got to watch that too. There's no way to learn it easy. And it brings plenty trouble" (113). And the narrator returns to the themes of danger and vulnerability in the story's last paragraph when describing "The young men, in their twenties or early thirties" who, "when they have a hard job on their hands often use shirts with the sleeves ripped out at the shoulders to give themselves more room. Swell looking muscles. What for? What good are they to a man when someone lands a slug of lead between his ribs?" (116). This note of futility mimics but also veers away from gangster-film and crime-strip argot by latching onto the image of the scalloped hat as a sign of creative imagination (in the

form of a circular strip) and a marker of personal identity. Williams's question squarely focuses on the vulnerability of the young men in a way that is consonant with his orphan theme overall.

In fact, as I have already mentioned, the world of unwanted children—orphaned and abandoned—provides not only the setting but a central theme of "Jean Beicke," which Williams called "The best short story I ever wrote" (Witemeyer, "Unpublished Introduction" 18). In his attentive analysis of "Jean Beicke," Michael Rozendal points out that "The locating opening phrase, 'During a time like this' . . ., inverts the undefined ambiguity of the traditional fairy tale with its free-floating 'once upon a time.' We are uncomfortably in history" (145). The catalog of castoff children that Williams supplies by way of introducing Jean Beicke shows that Passaic is indeed a world of orphans. There are "two premature brats, Navarro and Cryschka," "a little Hungarian Gypsy girl" (*Stories* 158), "a couple of Irish girls . . . named Cowley," (*Stories* 159) as well as other "kids" who are "not only dirty and neglected, but sick, ready to die (*Stories* 160). These anonymous infants are much worse off than the earlier set of children whom, like Jean, the narrator actually names, for their wards bring them in

> stinking and dirty. . . . The poor brats are almost dead sometimes, just living skeletons, almost, wrapped in rags, their heads caked with dirt, their eyes stuck together with pus and their legs all excoriated from the dirty diapers no one has had the interest to take off them regularly. One poor little pot we have now with a thin purplish skin and big veins standing out all over its head had a big sore place in the fold of its neck under the chin. (*Stories* 159)

All of these children show that the infant Jean Beicke, while an individual who makes a strong impression on the narrator and his colleagues, is also a representative figure (Rozendal 146). "'Jean Beicke,'" writes Rozendal, presents a bleak, modern tale of children that promises no

fantastic escapes from gingerbread houses. With increased childbirth tied to lack, the family is not romanticized here" (145). Similarly, the mother in "A Face of Stone" has lost most of her relatives and her impassivity is evidently a result of her being orphaned during World War I:

> Did she lose any of her people, I asked him.
>
> "She lost everybody, he said quietly. (*Stories* 175).

Babies and births also abound in the stories that make up the collage "World's End," and one in particular depicts a surfeit that echoes the "unwanted children" of "Jean Beicke" (*Stories* 158): "Miss Emerald used to say we ought to hang out a sign: Babies fresh every hour, any color desired. And a hundred per cent illegitimate, she would add laughing" (*Stories* 237). This joke appears right after an account of a plague of cats characterized as "vermin" (*Stories* 236), a juxtaposition that likens excess cats to the bumper crop of babies. Since the cats plague the grounds of a hospital, they are hunted down, a hunt which Williams echoes near the end of "World's End" with his story of two doctors attacking roaches with cans of ether because they eat all the blood specimens of the "Widal tests" for typhoid fever (*Stories* 241-242). These stories show that a battle for survival rages everywhere, though the manic roach-hunt also emphasizes the beleaguered effort to heal and protect humans. Like the orphans of "Life Along the Passaic," moreover, Jack O'Brien, the hero of "Under the Greenwood Tree," goes forth into "storms" to face down his fate; he is a "steady worker, a silent walker in the worst of storms, incredibly resistant, . . . solitary" (*Stories* 225). Williams's diction echoes the familiar phrase "orphans of the storm," which D.W. Griffith had also used as the title of his 1921 film. Williams risks a cliché in order to underscore the singularity and worth of an individual in a hostile environment.

Although Williams insists on a gruff realism which often shows his doctor-narrator to disadvantage by revealing his personal flaws, he also prepares his readers to be moved by the virtues and sufferings of the characters he profiles over the course of the collection. The objectivist mode of observation brings the particular excellences of individuals into view while emphasizing the social, economic, and existential barriers they face. The various narrative devices of collage ("Life along the Passaic," "World's End"), untagged dialogue, surprising reversals of perspective ("The Girl with a Pimply Face," "A Face of Stone"), understatement, and colloquial discourse all work together to cast the reader as a participant in the stories of the volume. Joseph Entin calls attention to this prominent aspect of the stories:

> The absence of quotation marks makes it difficult to distinguish one speaker from another, or speakers from the narrator. The lack of explanatory or introductory information amplifies the sense of disorientation that many of the stories take as their central theme. Just as the narrator is frequently faced with an unfamiliar scenario—a foreign part of town, a stranger's house, an unknown disease—so the reader, too, is given noticeably few clues and markers. We are thrust into strange surroundings, but stripped of the narratological road signs we expect to help us find our way. In these stories, narrative guidance is virtually nonexistent—we are on our own, traveling in alien territory without a map or compass (94).

It is true that we enter the various sick rooms and arenas of action or thought along with the narrator, and are often caught up short with him in the midst of some painful or poignant epiphany or reversal of perspective ("The Girl with a Pimply Face," "A Face of Stone"). In my view, there may be more purposefulness to this disorientation than Entin allows. The stories invite us into the world with their thick description and apparent plainness, but they also

routinely disrupt our sense of events and perspectives by calling attention to the conventionality of plot-lines and to both the creativity and constraints of language. If Williams's medical and sociological discourses construe people as objects of knowledge to manipulate and control, as Entin's Foucauldian analysis suggests that they sometimes do, these discourses also rub elbows with the speech of ordinary people, reminding us that such people are not just patients in a clinic or statistical phenomena and characters on the page of a clever physician's book, but people in their own right, whose interests and experiences, while partly registered in the pages of that book, also exceed or escape them. It is the virtue of Williams's self-scrutinizing language to make his readers feel the strictures of its limitations as well as its figurative depth.

In "The Girl with a Pimply Face," for example, Williams invites us to share his narrator's admiration for the girl of the title. He intensifies the pathos of the story by depicting the marked difference in attitude between his narrator and the fellow doctor who views the Russian family with scorn. Whereas the narrator is willing to be made a fool of in the eyes of his colleague because he gains a yield of pleasure in interacting with the young girl and because he comes to feel a genuine sympathy for her mother on account of the baby's congenital heart defect (despite his general distaste for the mother), the younger doctor and the narrator's wife call attention to the economic obligations dodged by the family. As James E. Breslin points out, "the story, with its careful juxtaposing of perspectives on the girl, is clearly about ways of looking at things, in particular a way that can discover in this pimply faced adolescent that hard straight thing—that secret core of personality—that for its author means excellence" (153).

Similarly, in "The Use of Force," the narrator objects to the mother's characterization of him as "a nice man," repudiating this phrase as an incorrect distraction in the face of a crisis which must be faced with cold aplomb. If the mother's "bad girl" and "nice man" get revealed

as inept or inadequate or downright specious signifiers by the doctor's response, his own rhetoric recasts the "magnificent blonde" Mathilda from "One of those picture children often reproduced in advertising leaflets and the photogravure sections of the Sunday Papers" (*Stories* 131) to "the savage brat" with whom he is both exasperated and in love (*Stories* 133). The conventions of the story he relates get disrupted all around, for the dispassionate doctor loses his temper and does not convince himself or his reader that his rationalizing about "social necessity" and protection (134) offset his "blind fury" and "feeling of adult shame, bred of a longing for muscular release" (135). If Marjorie Perloff argues that a dominant pattern in the stories of *Passaic* is that a female patient capitulates to the doctor's superior medical knowledge and masculine charm, she also notices that Williams's desire—so often checked and thwarted, but always central—gives the best stories their poignancy and emotional weight (844). As participant-observer, the doctor's desire infuses his narratives with a sense of the beauty and dignity of the people he admires and a profound resistance to the social and existential forces that occlude or maim that beauty and dignity.

Even as many of the stories do perform symbolic triumphs for their doctor-narrators, thereby rehabilitating or reinstating his professional authority as a physician, they also plainly show the doctor's vulnerability and volatility in a way that lets the reader make his or her own value judgments about the scenes and interactions depicted in each of the stories. This openness in the narrative form of the stories allows the people of Passaic to make an intense and varied impression on the reader. In my opinion, this aspect of the storytelling offsets or justifies the violence that characterizes the various forms of representation embodied in the story. Commentators like Robert Coles (58) and Entin (106) suggest that representation is inherently violent and exacts a toll at the expense of those represented, but the price of the knowledge,

when it allows for tender-hearted and critically-minded contact with the people represented, seems worth it, even necessary, in light of the crisis posed by the Depression.

If "The world's an orphan's home," then how do people make homes for themselves in it, "cold" as it is (in the title word of another story from *Life Along the Passaic*)? How does Williams hold out for the beauty, value, and worth of the people whom he depicts in these stories? What defends their worth and challenges readers to value that worth? As Entin argues, "The doctor stories ask readers to read between the lines, to interject our own subjectivities into the text, to assert our own opinions in the face of conflicting, opaque, or missing information. We are put in a position where our allegiances and identifications are in limbo. . . . These are dialogic texts that encourage, even demand, our input, even as such input cuts against the grain of the narrator's attitude" (Entin 102). In contrast to the situation of being an orphan in "Life Along the Passaic," moreover, there is the flourish of individuality which Williams signifies in the homemade hat-bands he isolates for attention. And more broadly (and more directly in keeping with the orphan trope), in the book as a whole, there are also numerous families. Alternative, marginalized, non-bourgeois families abound ("The Right Thing," "Dawn of Another Day"). There is also the somewhat irregular or anarchic life in "The Girl with a Pimply Face" and the shocking violence of the dysfunctional suburban family next door to the Williams family in "A Difficult Man." These efforts to form or sustain families and these scenes of domestic instability or disharmony ("To Fall Asleep," "Difficult Man," "Second Marriage," and the stories about Black Bess and the three fighting women impregnated by the same man in "World's End') show the reach of the orphan metaphor in the fictional world of the book. The orphans of Passaic point out the failures of various social institutions, including the hospital in "Jean Beicke," "The Cold World," and "World's End"; marriage in "To Fall Asleep"; the

bourgeois family in “Second Marriage,” “A Difficult Man,” and (offstage in) “Dawn of Another Day”; and school in the truancy of “The Girl with a Pimply Face” or the classroom anarchy of the “kids driving the teacher crazy” in “Life Along the Passaic.” The inauthentic marriage figured by the insomnia of “To Fall Asleep” is opposed to the quotidian but significant transformation signaled in the title of “Dawn of Another Day,” too (the dawn is of “another day,” not a revolutionary “new” era). The sexual consummation that unites the figures and changes Ed in “Dawn” also contrasts with Bill’s heartache and frustration in “To Fall Asleep.”

On the other hand, the cozy domesticity of “Four Bottles of Beer,” the touching marital devotion of the husband in “A Face of Stone,” the doctor’s sympathetic identification with the mother and her family of “A Night in June,” together with the pastoral ideal of “Under the Greenwood Tree” contrast with the recurrent scenes of conflict and domestic failure so prominent throughout *Life Along the Passaic*. So does the homemade family of “Dawn of Another Day,” even if the resolution to that story is contrived. “Under the Greenwood Tree” shows a single man living beyond the pale of society—echoing the socially marginal style of life led by Ed, Pauline, and Fred on the yacht of “Dawn of Another Day” (and of Doc Rivers in a key story from *The Knife of the Times*). Like the courtiers in the forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Jack O’Brien is a “prince” who inhabits a place away from the dangers of urban institutions and the strictures of the bourgeois family. He is a maverick hero, a “character,” whose work ethic, personal dignity, and idiosyncrasy is championed even by the narrator’s emphatically bourgeois brother. At the same time, he is something of an overgrown child, an adult waif.

The juxtapositions and collage method of the opening and closing stories work against an easy acceptance of conventions of genre and representation by confusing readers. The instability

of representation challenges readers to wonder about the reality behind what's depicted. Williams commits himself to the "low" in order to make us see these people, to register their individual character and dignity. The figure of the orphan becomes a major trope for the collection as a whole: people are left unprotected and disadvantaged by a social world that "funny strips," or caricatures and robs them of dignity in the process. Williams's defamiliarization and collage, his untagged speech and lack of clarity about who is speaking and to whom in "Life Along the Passaic" or other stories where speech is spotlighted as the central element ("At the Front") are calculated to make readers focus more on the particular qualities of the characters as they are rendered. Readers must strain harder to see them and decipher their character and determine their significance. The orphan metaphor characterizes people as being at sea, lost, disrespected or without family—as excess people or unwanted masses (like the babies of "Jean Beicke" and "World's End" or the prowling cats in the hospital and the roaches that eat the blood samples of "World's End"), but Williams champions outsiders like Ed and Fred in "Dawn of Another Day" or distinctive individuals like Jack O'Brien in "Under the Greenwood Tree" who make a life on their own terms. In the latter case, Williams articulates his praise for such independence through a cagey use of the pastoral mode, for the title of his story comes from a song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and Thomas Hardy had adopted the line as a title for his novel about rural musicians. Williams's story offers a character profile in two times, that of the narrator's remembered interactions with O'Brien and that of a kind of archeological expedition which the narrator makes with the local "pump man" to O'Brien's home in the woods. The second stanza of Amiens' song in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* turns out to be the one most relevant to William's story, but the subtitle of Hardy's novel, "a rural painting of the

Dutch School," also befits Williams's valorizations of the visual, the realistically vivid, and the rural in his story:

> Who doth ambition shun
> And loves to live I' the sun,
> Seeking the food he eats
> And pleased with what he gets,
>
> Come hither, come hither, come hither.
> Here shall he see
> No enemy
> But winter and rough weather. (*As You Like It* II.35-42)

Like Doc Rivers in *The Knife of the Times* or like Twain's Huck Finn, Jack O'Brien "take[s] to the woods" and makes a home for himself there. This capacity to fend for himself is a price he must pay for violating social norms, for he has dallied with the wife of a saloon keeper (*Stories* 230). The signs of O'Brien's accomplishment are not only the rough homestead that the narrator pokes around in but also his mannerisms, his speech, and his self-respect in the face of his poverty. As Williams notices in the unpublished introduction to his short stories, "The worm of the world kept writhing on its self as always dragging men under in its convolutions" (22), but O'Brien has managed for a time to counteract them.

As a counterpoint to the pictures of vulnerability that punctuate *Life Along the Passaic*, Williams's offers a catalogue of homemade objects to admire: the boy's canoe that opens "Life Along the Passaic" and the scalloped hats that close it, the home brew of "Four Bottles of Beer," and Jack O'Brien's lean-to in "Under the Greenwood Tree." These totems of personal craft

parallel the distinctive qualities of other characters Williams admires, including the courage of the orphans in "Life Along the Passaic," the "hard straight thing" of the girl with the pimply face and of O'Brien, Mathilda's beauty in "The Use of Force," the mother's amiable calm in "A Night in June," and the easy conviviality of the householder of "Four Bottles of Beer." Beyond and alongside all of these items and qualities is the distinctive living speech that Williams prizes everywhere in his stories, holding up vivid turns of phrase, striking dialects, and colorful idioms to his readers' eyes for their delight and admiration. ("At the Front" is one story that revels in the vernacular by adopting the form of a monologue in the voice of a black veteran named Milton Marshal whom Williams admired.[6]) These things serve as an antidote to orphanhood, that zombie-like condition of

> a thousand automatons. Who because they
> neither know their sources nor the sills of their
> disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
> for the most part,
> locked and forgot in their desires—unroused. (*Paterson* 6)

Like the language of *Paterson*, the object of the stories in *Life Along the Passaic* is to rouse its readers to a keener consciousness of their desires and disappointments. The closing paragraph of the last story in Williams's collection makes this clear. Through its pictures of excess and disease in contrast to the parodic apocalypse with which it closes, "World's End" calls for an end to the world as it is known in the book, as a world of unwanted, uncared for people. Instead of closing on a definitive note, "World's End" repeats the collection's pattern of referring to

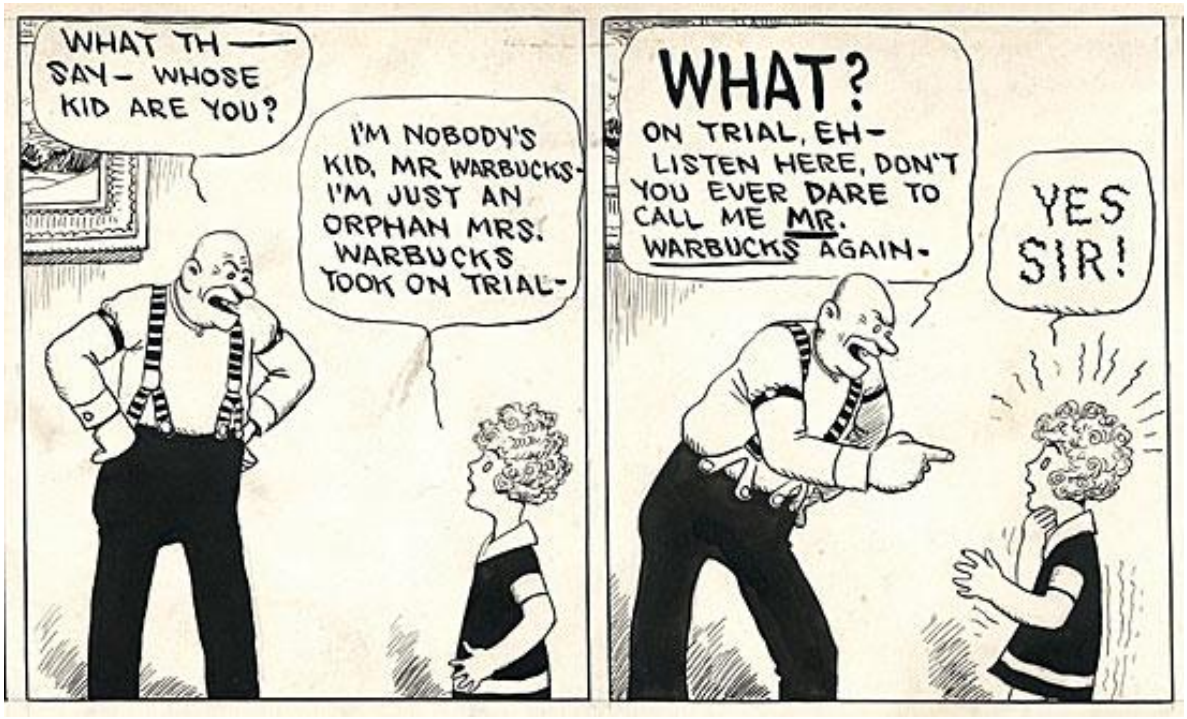
[6] See Witemeyer, "A History and Some Interpretive Uses" (438-439). Witemeyer suggests that Marshal may also be the model for the patient suffering from syphilis in "World's End," in which case, as "a lover of cats" he functions as a positive counterexample to the engineer Olaf and the internes, who massacre them.

representations, situating the priest's exclamation that "Lucifer has escaped" as a story "You can read . . . in the papers every day" (*Stories* 242). Like *Life Along the Passaic* as a whole, the final story of the collection challenges the reader to resist the reductive or oversimplifying figurations of a complex, threatened world in favor of a more open-minded empathy.

APPENDIX

Map of Passaic from1930 or before (Rutgers University Website)

http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/PASSAIC_COUNTY/Passaic_2.gif


WHAT TH—
SAY- WHOSE KID ARE YOU?
I'M NOBODY'S KID, MR WARBUCKS- I'M JUST AN ORPHAN MRS. WARBUCKS TOOK ON TRIAL-
WHAT?
ON TRIAL, EH- LISTEN HERE, DON'T YOU EVER DARE TO CALL ME MR. WARBUCKS AGAIN-
YES SIR!

Works Cited

Auster, Donald. "A Content Analysis of 'Little Orphan Annie.'" *Social Problems* 2.1 (July 1954): 26-33.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *The Comic-Stripped American*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1973.

Breslin, James E. *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1970.

de Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City." *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Ed. Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Coles, Robert. *William Carlos Williams: The Knack of Survival in America*. 1975. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1983.

Entin, Joseph B. *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 2007.

Gish, Robert F. *William Carlos Williams: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.

Goldberg, David J. *A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1916-1921*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989.

Goulart, Ron. *The Adventurous Decade*. New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1975.

Harvey, .Robert C. *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1994.

"Heroes: Six Orphans." *Time* Magazine XXI.20 May 15, 1933. Accessed May 24, 2011. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,745500,00.html

Johnson, Bob. "'A Whole Synthesis of His Time': Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939." *American Quarterly* 54.2 (2002): 179-215.

Marschall, Richard. *America's Great Comic-Strip Artists*. New York: Abbeville P, 1989.

Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. New York, Penguin, 1982.

"Orphan." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Third Edition. Oxford UP, 2004; online version March 2011. <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/132728>; accessed 26 May 2011. An entry for this word was first included in *New English Dictionary*, 1903.

"Orphan Boys Save Train from Washout in Storm." *New York Times* May 4, 1933, pp. 1 and 8.

Orbh- . *American Heritage College Dictionary*. Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Perloff, Marjorie. "The Man Who Loved Women: The Medical Fictions of William Carlos Williams." *Georgia Review* 34 (1980): 840-853.

Rhoads, Ellen. "Little Orphan Annie and Levi-Strauss: The Myth and the Method." *Journal of American Folklore* 86 (1973): 345-357.

Robinson, Jerry. *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974.

Rozendal, Michael. "Forms of Need: William Carlos Williams in the Radical Thirties Little Journal." *William Carlos Williams Review* 27.2 (2007): 137-155.

Schuster, Joshua. "William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, and the Anthropological Imaginary." *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.3 (2007): 116-132.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington. Fourth Ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Slate, J. E. "William Carlos Williams and the Modern Short Story. *Southern Review* 4.3 (July 1968): 647-664. Rpt. In *William Carlos Williams: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Robert F. Gish. Boston: Twayne, 1989. 160-69.

Smith, Bruce. *The History of Little Orphan Annie*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.

Walker, Brian. *The Comics Before 1945*. New York: Abrams, 2004.

Wallace, Emily Mitchell. *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1968.

Whitman, Walt. *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: Literary Classics of the United State, 1982.

Williams, William Carlos. *Collected Poems*. Volume I 1909-1939. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. 1986. New York: New Directions, 1991.

---. *Collected Poems*. Volume II 1939-1962. Ed. Christopher MacGowan. 1988. New York: New Directions, 1991.

---. *The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1996.

---. *Paterson*. Ed. Christopher MacGowan. Rev. Ed. New York: New Directions, 1992.

---. *Selected Essays*. Random House, 1954. New Directions, 1969.

Witemeyer, Hugh. "William Carlos Williams' Introduction to His Short Stories: A History and Some Interpretive Uses." *Journal of Modern Literature* 18 (1993): 435-446.

Witemeyer, Hugh. "Williams' Unpublished Introduction to His Short Stories." *William Carlos Williams Review* 16 (1990): 1-25.