To Brooklyn Bridge

SUMMARY

How many mornings, after a cold sleep on rippling water, a seagull will tilt and wheel in flight—shedding white feathers, tracing circles in the air, and creating a grand image of freedom above the confined waters of New York Harbor.

Then, with a perfect turn, the gull will leave our sight, as ghostly as daydreamed ships that seem to sail across the paperwork we're supposed to file. Until office elevators release us from our workdays...

I'm reminded of movie theaters: those wide, illusory screens where crowds lean toward some flickering vision, which is never quite revealed, but which other crowds rush to see, and which is projected for them on the same wall.

And you, Brooklyn Bridge, across New York Harbor, looking as silvery as though you were the sun itself stepping forward, yet always holding your movement slightly in check. Your inherent freedom is what holds you in place!

Emerging from some subway crowd, jail or asylum cell, or loft apartment, a mentally ill person rushes to your high walkway. After swaying there a moment, shirt billowing and whistling in the wind, the person falls, as if in a prank, from the platform with its silent traffic procession.

The noon sun spreads from your girders down Wall Street and other New York streets, bright as a jet of flame from an acetylene torch. Throughout the afternoon, dockside cranes turn in a cloudy sky... Brooklyn Bridge, your cables still bask in the air of the North Atlantic Ocean.

And the reward you give is as mysterious as the Jewish conception of the afterlife... You grant (us city dwellers) the honor of an endless anonymity, which wonderfully seems to absolve us all.

Oh, you string instrument and shrine, welded together by the mythical Furies (since how could labor alone have strung your harp-like cables)! You holy site where the prophet makes his promises, you answer to the outcast's prayers, you expression of romantic bliss!

Once more, the lights of the traffic crossing your fluent, dynamic shape—looking like a string of beads, a pure exhalation of the stars—resemble eternity in miniature. We've watched as you seem to hold up the entire night sky.

Brooklyn Bridge, I've hung out by the docks, in your shadow—only at night can one truly sense your shadow. The New York skyline looks like a set of glowing, unwrapped packages, and winter snow is already burying a hard year.

Oh, Bridge, as timeless as the river you span, arcing over the ocean and the slumbering prairies—please swoop down, descend to the humblest among us, and offer a new kind of sacred vision in the process.

THEMES

FREEDOM, JOY, AND TRANSCENDENCE

"To Brooklyn Bridge" is the opening poem of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, a long poetic sequence about American identity and 20th-century urban life. The sequence focuses on New York City's iconic Brooklyn Bridge, a landmark that profoundly inspired Crane. This first poem presents the bridge as a symbol of both "freedom" and lofty spirituality. In ecstatic, worshipful language, Crane's poem depicts the bridge not only as a great work of architecture but as a respite from the constraints of ordinary life, the source of a heroic and inspiring "myth" for modern times. Through its praise, the poem expresses an optimistic sense that the modern age can offer people beauty, freedom, and higher meaning, even within the rat race of city life.

The poem depicts Brooklyn Bridge as both inspired and inspiring, an expression of irrepressible freedom and joy. For example, Crane associates it with the seagulls flying over New York Harbor, which seems to present viewers with an inspiring image of "Liberty." The poem also compares the birds' flight to the "sails" that an office worker might daydream about while looking at paperwork. This image shows how city dwellers can fall into boring routines yet also dream of escape from such routines—and the poem suggests that the bridge expresses or embodies this kind of dream.

The poem then praises the bridge's own "freedom": the dynamic energy of its design, which paradoxically seems to keep it stable. This image might metaphorically suggest that freedom—including the political "Liberty" America claims to champion—keeps a *society* stable. (Crane's reference to capital-L "Liberty" also evokes the Statue of Liberty, visible from the bridge.) Later, Crane compares the bridge's appearance to a free-flowing "idiom," as though the bridge were continually speaking an uninhibited language. (Maybe the kind of language he hopes to write as a poet!)

Ultimately, the poem presents the bridge as more than just beautiful and inspiring: it's something sacred, an "immaculate" expression of humanity's highest ideals. Crane treats the bridge as reverently as if it were a divine presence, expressing skepticism that "mere toil" could have assembled the bridge's harp-like "strings": it seems the product of some heavenly power.

Crane also claims the bridge offers a "guerdon" (reward) that's as "obscure as that heaven of the Jews"—as ambiguous or remote as the Jewish conception of the afterlife. In Crane's view, the bridge provides spiritual rewards that are hard to grasp but deeply fulfilling. Finally, he implores the bridge to "descend" toward "us lowliest," like a god swooping to earth to mingle with humble humans. By linking the high and the low, the bridge will "lend a myth to God": create a new kind of belief in a skeptical age. (It's as though God could *use* a new story to proclaim, because modern people don't believe the old ones!)

All in all, the poet casts the bridge as a heroic, sacred expression of humanity's ideals—and thereby insists that such ideals are still possible in the modern world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

HUMAN CONNECTION AND THE MODERN CITY

"To Brooklyn Bridge" portrays the bridge as a symbol capable of unifying modern people (and perhaps modern *Americans* especially). Bridges are literally built to connect things, and Crane imagines his favorite bridge as a source of metaphorical, *human* connection. He associates it with the movies—another modern phenomenon that brings people together—and suggests that it attracts and inspires people across the social spectrum, including society's outcasts. Broadly, the poem portrays New York, or the modern democratic city, as a kind of sacred gathering place for anyone and everyone, from the loftiest to the "lowliest."

The poem associates Brooklyn Bridge, which links Manhattan and Brooklyn, with various forms of profound human connection. For example, it makes Crane "think of cinemas," with their "multitudes" all craning toward the same grand "scene." He views the bridge, a beloved public monument, as a modern site of communion. He also notes that it attracts society's "prophet[s]," "lover[s]," and "pariah[s]"—that is, its visionaries, romantics, and outcasts. (Crane seems to have considered himself all three, as many poets do!)

Moreover, the bridge gives the gift of "anonymity": it joins people with the larger "multitude" and allows them to transcend their individual selves. Crane seems to be thinking here of the anonymous feeling one gets while walking through city crowds. Many people find this experience liberating and strangely communal, or democratic: when no one knows anyone else, everyone is just a human being among other human beings.

Thus, the poem imagines the bridge—and, by extension, New York or American democracy—as a special gathering site for everyone under the sun. The allusion to Lady "Liberty" suggests that, to Crane, the bridge represents what the Statue of Liberty traditionally represents (thanks to the poem quoted at its base). In other words, it's a beacon of welcome to all, including lonely eccentrics and romantics. Even the jumper goes to the bridge to *perform* suicide, like a sad "jest," for a crowd: that is, even the most tragically lonely person goes there to be a little less alone. Meanwhile, the "lover[]" goes there to find love, the "pariah" to find company, and so on.

In a grand, metaphorical sense, the poem claims that the bridge binds America itself together, from the "sea" to the "prairie[s]." Accordingly, the poet uses a communal, first-person-plural voice—saluting "our" shared experience of the bridge and the city—and issues a kind of prayer for the bridge to inspire us all, especially "us lowliest."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Line 8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 31-32
- Line 36
- Lines 41-44

LOVE, DEATH, AND ETERNITY

"To Brooklyn Bridge" depicts the bridge as a site of both love and death. It's a meeting point for lovers (so that it seems to embody "the lover's cry"), but also a jumping-off point for suicides (including the "bedlamite," or mentally ill person, whose "fall" the poem describes). In this way, the bridge seems to embody the most abiding aspects of the human condition, from the joyous to the tragic. In fact, though Crane wrote the poem when the bridge was just four decades old, he depicts it as a timeless object, an image of "eternity" itself. The poem suggests that great monuments like the bridge (or even New York City itself) reflect our common humanity, in all its lasting complexity.

The poem associates Brooklyn Bridge with the extremes of love and death, or the best and worst of the human experience. It calls the bridge, among other things, "The lover's cry," suggesting that it embodies the passions and pleasures of love. "Under thy shadow by the piers I waited" may be a subtle reference to gay cruising: during the era when Crane (who was himself gay) wrote the poem, the bridge was a popular meetup spot for gay men. At the other extreme, the Brooklyn Bridge was and is a location sometimes used by suicidal jumpers. The poem describes one such suicide, performed as if for a "speechless" audience.

Through its links to love and death, the bridge seems to remind people that they're part of a grander cycle. It's not just an

impressive feat of engineering or a point of civic pride: it's a monument to our full humanity. The poet imagines the bridge offering a reward as eternal as "heaven," and calls the bridge "Sleepless as the river under thee": something as tireless and timeless as nature itself. The bridge even appears to "lift[]" the entire "night" in its "arms," again as if it's part of the natural order of things. In turn, the bridge seems to connect (or bridge!) modern human beings with the natural and eternal.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-20
- Lines 25-26
- Line 32
- Lines 33-36
- Lines 37-38
- Lines 41-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

How many dawns, ...
... bay waters Liberty—

"To Brooklyn Bridge" is a tribute to one of the world's most famous bridges, but it takes a few stanzas to introduce its main subject. The poem begins, instead, by describing the flight of a seagull *near* the bridge. By delaying the introduction of the bridge itself—the entrance of its main character, so to speak—the poem creates a sense of drama and expectation.

The description of the seagull is highly musical, full of short /i/ assonance and consonance:

> How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
> The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
> Shedding white rings of tumult, [...]

The echoing /i/, /ip,/ and /ings/ sounds seem to ripple throughout the stanza, much like the "rippling" water around the "rest[ing]" bird. (Gulls often sleep on or near open water; this particular gull has been resting on the "bay waters" of New York Harbor.) The repetition also creates a sense of energy and momentum as the bird takes flight. Once aloft in the cold dawn air, the gull dives and wheels—"dip[s] and pivot[s]"—by adjusting his "chill[y]" wings. In the process, he seems to trace "white rings" in the air, and he "Shed[s]" white feathers due to the turbulence ("tumult") of his flight.

As he soars, according to the poet, the gull "build[s] high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty." This odd phrase mashes together several ideas into one dense image. Mainly, it suggests that the gull's flight creates, or "build[s]," an image of liberation that contrasts with the confined (metaphorically, "chained") waters of the "bay." Indeed, the bird seems to shed not only his feathers but any ties to the earth below. But the capitalization of "Liberty" also evokes another familiar sight in New York Harbor: the Statue of Liberty. The poet isn't claiming that the gull literally *builds* this statue, of course; rather, the gull's rising flight seems to create a comparable, figurative monument to freedom. It might even draw the viewer's eyes *toward* Lady Liberty. Moreover, the seagull does this repeatedly, morning after morning: "How many dawns [this happens]," the poet marvels, opening the poem in a tone of wonder.

If the poet seems to be squeezing a lot into these first few lines, that's because he's doing it on purpose! Hart Crane developed a style that flowed rapidly from image to image, metaphor to metaphor, in a fluid, intuitive, associative fashion. He called this technique his "logic of metaphor," and he used it to capture the dynamic, fast-paced modern world—including the busy cityscape this poem portrays.

LINES 5-8

Then, with inviolate ...
... day . . .

Lines 5-8 present another rapid burst of imagery and figurative language. Crane's fast-moving style forces readers to stay on their toes—just as New York City does!

After circling in the air, Crane says, the seagull "forsake[s] our eyes" in an "inviolate curve." The word "inviolate" means intact or pure, so Crane means that the gull makes a perfect, unerring curve as it flies out of sight. As it disappears, it seems ghostly, or "apparitional." In fact—Crane adds via simile—it seems as ghostly as "sails that cross / Some page of figures to be filed away." What are these? Well, a "page of figures" is a sheet full of data—the kind of paperwork a bored office worker might have to "file[]." And sailing is the kind of thing a bored office worker might daydream about. So Crane is comparing the gull's vanishing flight to a fleet of imagined "sails" that seem to "cross" the boring paperwork. (It's no accident, by the way, that the Brooklyn Bridge itself resembles a pair of sails; this "apparitional" imagery is a kind of preview of the poem's *main* image.)

Crane further suggests that the daydreaming continues "Till elevators drop us from our day"—in other words, until the office workday ends. The seagull and sails, therefore, symbolize the kind of freedom that modern office drones fantasize about. The bridge, once it's introduced, represents the same freedom. The poem suggests, then, that modern life can feel like a dreary rat race, but that it also offers the possibility of liberation and escape. For most of us, after all, the workday ends eventually, and "elevators" (still a fairly new invention in Crane's time) "drop us" from confinement like an escape hatch.

Notice that Crane speaks, here, in the first-person plural, the communal voice of "our" city. At other moments, however, he will speak as a singular "I." This shifting perspective positions

him as both an individual New Yorker and a representative of the community as a whole. Later, it will frame the bridge as something both personally significant to the poet and universally meaningful to modern culture.

LINES 9-12

I think of ...
... the same screen;

The third stanza marks another unexpected transition—or jump-cut, as in the movies. In fact, this stanza is *about* the movies, which were still very new when Crane was writing the poem (the 1920s). Moving-picture technology was in its infancy, and movies had only begun to draw mass audiences during the previous decade. Still, they'd caught on rapidly, and theaters were sprouting up in cities all over the world. Already, people were gravitating toward the silver screen as an escape from the pressures of modern life.

This escapist impulse, the poem implies, is what makes Crane "think of cinemas" after describing the seagull's "Liberty" and the office worker's daydreams. Again, the poem progresses through a kind of controlled free-association, segueing rapidly from seagull to sails to cinemas while offering a minimum of explanation. Crane seems to be borrowing his technique partly from filmmakers, who often juxtapose scenes and images in the same efficient way (e.g., through cross-cutting and montages). He wants the poem to *feel* as modern as the movies.

Crane describes these "cinemas" as "sleights"—deft tricks or illusions, like a magician's sleight-of-hand—that are "panoramic," or broad and sweeping. He's basically describing movie screens themselves, which present wide, illusory pictures. (He's also punning on the word "slates," as in blackboards or tablets used for writing. Like magic blackboards, Crane suggests, movie screens conjure up images, erase them instantly, and present new images in their place.) As the screens flicker, the "multitudes"—mass audiences—"ben[d]" forward eagerly, as if awaiting some revelatory "scene" or "flash" of insight. This revelation is "Never disclosed," but new crowds "hasten[]" to seek it anyway, and the "same screen" extends its tantalizing promise "to other eyes."

Just like the office worker's daydreams, then, the movies represent a kind of ghostly escapist fantasy. This fantasy may be illusory, but it's addictive, a way of coping with the modern rat race.

The imagery in this stanza probably alludes to a famous allegory from ancient Greek philosophy: Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

- Plato imagines a group of prisoners in a cave, watching shadows projected on the cave wall by a flickering fire—and mistaking the shadows for the real objects that cast them. Though one prisoner (the philosopher) learns that the shadows are *representations* of reality, not reality itself, his fellow prisoners never achieve or want to achieve this understanding. They're content with the illusion.

Crane's description may imply, then, that modern moviegoers are the same way: they take refuge in the fantasy life movies provide, preferring the illusion to the sting of reality. More optimistically, Crane may be suggesting that cinemas offer the kind of dreams people *need*—that there's something truly inspirational, even magical, about the movies.

LINES 13-16

And Thee, across ...
... freedom staying thee!

In the fourth stanza, the main attraction finally arrives! After 12 lines of dramatic buildup, Crane introduces the poem's subject: the Brooklyn Bridge. In fact, he *apostrophizes* the bridge in worshipful, ecstatic tones:

> And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
> As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
> Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
> Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Between the archaic pronouns ("Thee"/"thy") and the hyperbolic praise, Crane sounds as if he's addressing an ancient god rather than a modern bridge. Clearly, he sees the bridge as something worth revering: a beautiful expression of humanity's highest ideals. As the juxtaposition with the "cinema[]" implies, he also views it as an expression of human *dreams*—namely, dreams of "freedom" and escape.

His description stresses the bridge's unlikely combination of dynamism and stasis. The structure stays rooted in place, yet its design makes it look as though it's perpetually in motion. The "sun[light]" seems to "step" across it, "pac[ing]" in flashes of "silver"; indeed, the bridge itself seems to "stride" across "the harbor." Even so, it never seems to *complete* its stride and move on; it always leaves "Some motion [...] unspent." It remains suspended where it is—in fact, it's a suspension bridge! Paradoxically, the bridge's very "freedom" creates an internal ("Implicit") tension that "stay[s]" it or holds it still.

Notice that this description has potential symbolic overtones. Crane may be drawing an analogy between the design of the bridge and the workings of a democracy: in other words, just as the bridge's freedom holds it in place, a society's freedom keeps it stable. By permitting certain kinds of flexibility and mobility, both a bridge and a democracy can prevent their own collapse. (Although Crane only hints at this symbolism for now, the final stanza will confirm that the poem is as much about America in general as the Brooklyn Bridge in particular.)

LINES 17-20

Out of some ...
... the speechless caravan.

The fifth stanza brings another unexpected transition. After describing the vast grandeur of the bridge—like a movie director using a wide-angle lens—Crane zooms in on a single, small figure: a "bedlamite." This is an old-fashioned term for a mentally deranged person or asylum patient ("Bedlam" is the nickname of a famous psychiatric hospital in London). Crane tracks this person as they emerge from somewhere in the New York City scene—from the "scuttl[ing]" crowd in the "subway," a jail or asylum "cell," or a "loft" apartment—and hurry ("speed[]") to the "parapets" of the Brooklyn Bridge. A parapet is a protective wall running along the side of a structure (bridge, roof, etc.), so this person is hurrying to one of the barriers along the Brooklyn Bridge's pedestrian walkway.

Sadly, this person has come to the bridge to die by suicide. They "Tilt[]" for a "moment[]" on the side of the bridge, their shirt "ballooning" and whistling "shrill[y]" in the wind. Then they "fall[]," presumably to their death, from the "caravan" of pedestrian and automobile traffic witnessing the tragedy like a "speechless" audience. (Perhaps some observers are speechless with shock; perhaps some passersby fail to notice the suicide or move on indifferently.)

Tragic as the event is, Crane calls the jumper, or their jump, a "jest," as though it were a prank performed for the crowd. This grimly ironic word choice might reflect the strangeness of the act—the leap *looks* like a stunt to startled observers—and/or the jumper's own sense that their life is a cruel joke.

The person's name, age, gender, etc. are unspecified. The lack of identifying details makes them a kind of universal figure: they could be anyone whose mental health has taken a turn for the worse. Amid a poem whose overall tone is one of celebration, this miniature scene marks a brief, sobering comedown: it's like a sad clip in a generally uplifting montage. It also depicts the Brooklyn Bridge as a magnet for outcasts, including the most marginal and troubled figures in the urban crowd. Later lines will expand on this idea, which may reflect the poet's own struggles and outsider status. (Tragically, Crane himself went on to die by suicide, jumping to his death from a ship at the age of 32.)

LINES 21-24

Down Wall, from ...
... North Atlantic still.

Lines 21-24 describe the bridge and its surroundings as they appear in the "noon" sun. The poem generally traces an arc from day to night, from the "dawns" of line 1 to the "night" and "darkness" of later stanzas (lines 36 and 38). This sixth stanza is the midpoint of the poem, so fittingly enough, it's set at noon.

These lines are densely metaphorical, summoning up a cluster of ideas and images in a flash:

> Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
> A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;

"Noon" here is a metonym for bright sunlight, which is closely associated with the middle of the day. This sunlight seems to "leak[]" from the bridge's "girder[s]" (support beams) into the "street[s]" of New York—including the famous "Wall" Street in lower Manhattan. In other words, the hot noon sun flashes off the metal beams of the bridge, so brightly that it's noticeable in the heart of New York's financial district. (By referring to the street simply as "Wall," Crane also evokes the image of sunlight on literal city walls.) The flashing sunlight resembles a "rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene," as though the whole sky were an acetylene torch sending a sharp jet of flame into the streets. (Acetylene torches can be used as cutting tools, just like a ripsaw or an animal's sharp tooth.) It's a weirdly compressed, almost surreal image, but it neatly captures how dazzling the bridge can look in the hot sun.

Moreover, "acetylene" torches are used in manufacturing and welding, so this unexpected word is a reminder of the industrial might that produced the bridge in the first place. The following line refers to industry as well: "All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn." In this context, "derricks" refers to dockside cranes used for loading and unloading ships. Their beams "turn" in the sky, or "cloud[s]," above New York Harbor throughout the "afternoon." (Notice how time progresses from "noon" to "afternoon" over the course of the stanza.)

Meanwhile, the "cables" of the nearby bridge move lightly in the wind, as if the whole structure were "breath[ing]" the air of the "North Atlantic" Ocean. Here and in subsequent lines, Crane personifies the bridge, imagining it as a living, breathing manifestation of its city and environment.

LINES 25-28

And obscure as ...
... thou dost show.

Having just described the Brooklyn Bridge as if it were alive and "breath[ing]," Crane now describes how it embodies—or participates in—the *spiritual* life of its city. For the poet, the bridge symbolizes more than the wonders of modern engineering. It's like a secular temple, offering a blessing or precious reward to everyone who witnesses it.

But that reward ("guerdon") is hard to pin down; it's as "obscure as that heaven of the Jews." Crane's simile here alludes to the Jewish conception of life after death. In traditional Jewish theology, the "world to come" is considered fundamentally unknowable, by contrast with the more detailed afterlife imagined in various other faiths. Crane implies, then, that whatever the bridge offers people is both sacred and mysterious. The following lines, with their reverent apostrophe,

offer a few more hints:

> [...] Accolade thou dost bestow
> Of anonymity time cannot raise:
> Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

Crane claims that the bridge "bestow[s]" the "Accolade" of "anonymity" on people, and that this honor is permanent: "time cannot raise" it. ("Raise" here means something like *suspend*; it also puns on "raze," as in *destroy*.) Crane's claim sounds paradoxical at first, since "anonymity" isn't usually considered an honor; in fact, it's what fame and accolades usually erode. But Crane is suggesting that anonymity can actually feel like a blessing, or even a transcendent state. Becoming one face among millions—participating in a crowd or city that's much larger than oneself—can be a relief, a joy, and a profound communal experience. Because the giant bridge instills these feelings in its visitors, it seems to represent a "Vibrant reprieve" from, or "pardon" for, their individual sufferings and faults. It reassures them that they're part of something much larger: a collective human experience.

Broadly, these lines seem to link religious notions of "heaven" with an idealized notion of democratic life (as represented by New York City, America, etc.). Like the afterlife some religious believers imagine, an ideal democracy fuses people of all kinds into a communal whole. For Crane, the Brooklyn Bridge stood as an emblem of this kind of "Vibrant" society.

LINES 29-32

O harp and ...
... the lover's cry,—

Lines 29-32 praise the Brooklyn Bridge through a fresh series of metaphors:

> O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
> (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
> Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
> Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,—

First, Crane compares the bridge to both a "harp" and an "altar," suggesting that its design visually resembles both. That is, the bridge's wire cables resemble the "strings" of a giant harp, and its long raised platform resembles the ceremonial platforms found in some houses of worship. These comparisons also imply that the bridge is both an artistic and spiritual instrument. That is, it offers both poetic inspiration and a kind of religious blessing. (The harp or lyre is a traditional symbol of poetry as well as music; it also features in many Christian depictions of heaven and is associated with King David in Jewish art and iconography. Crane might be bringing any or all of these allusions into play!)

Crane specifies that the bridge is an unlikely *fusion* of harp and altar, and that "the fury fused" the two items together. Here, he's alluding to the Furies—fierce goddesses in Greek mythology—in order to suggest that the bridge's fusion of art and faith required a superhuman effort. The parenthetical line 30 implies that, in fact, divine assistance *must* have been involved; such majestic beauty couldn't possibly emerge from human "toil" alone. (In other words, the bridge's beautiful, harp-like, "choiring strings" seem like the product of heavenly intervention, not just earthly labor.)

Expanding on these themes, Crane calls the bridge the "Terrific" (wondrous) site of "the prophet's pledge," as well as the "Prayer of pariah" and "the lover's cry." It's a place where society's prophets preach to crowds—or perhaps the fulfillment of their grandest promises. It's also a place where outcasts (social "pariah[s]") feel less lonely, a symbol of their hopes or answer to their "Prayer[s]." Finally, it's a place where lovers find romance. Its beauty even seems to embody their ecstatic "cr[ies]." (Crane was a gay man, and in his time, the area around the Brooklyn Bridge was a popular gay cruising spot.) In all sorts of ways, then, the bridge links people together, including people at the social margins. It's a monument to art, faith, and love alike.

LINES 33-36

Again the traffic ...
... in thine arms.

The poem began at "dawn[]," but by the end of the ninth stanza, "night" has arrived. Lines 33-36 describe the Brooklyn Bridge as it appears in the evening, as twinkling "traffic lights" stream across its "path." Once again, Crane employs a series of rapid, rapturous metaphors:

> Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
> Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
> Beading thy path—condense eternity:

So these headlights, traffic signals, etc. resemble both a string of gemlike "Bead[s]" and a pure exhalation of the "stars" themselves. (The word "immaculate," meaning pure, might allude to the Immaculate Conception in Christian theology; as always, Crane views the bridge in exalted, religious terms.) These traffic lights "condense eternity" in the sense that they look like a glimpse of heaven, and also because they move in an endless series along a finite stretch of road. As the lights "skim" from one end to the other, the bridge's design resembles a "swift / Unfractioned idiom": a rapid, fluent, unbroken stream of language. (Perhaps Crane is implying that the bridge embodies the qualities his own language aspires to: the kind of beauty and fluency his poetry hopes to achieve.)

The stanza closes by personifying the bridge again: "And we have seen night lifted in thine arms." Crane could be alluding to Atlas, the mythical giant condemned to carry the sky on his

shoulders. Yet the overtones here are positive; Crane's language frames the bridge as something literally *uplifting*. The communal "we" seems to look on in awe as the glowing bridge spans the entire night sky.

LINES 37-40

Under thy shadow ...
... year . . .

In the next-to-last stanza, Crane re-enters the poem as an individual "I." (In the previous line, he spoke as the communal "we.") His language becomes hushed, mysterious, repetitious:

> Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
> Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.

This is the only moment in the poem when Crane describes a *personal* relationship with the bridge. The description is literally "shadow[y]," leaving much to the imagination. Crane doesn't say what he "waited" for "by the piers" around the Brooklyn Bridge, and the poem doesn't provide any further clues (or offer much information about the speaker at all). However, this line is often read as a reference to gay cruising, since, in real life, Crane lived near the bridge and picked up men in the area. In other words, the poet/speaker was probably "wait[ing]" for sex, love, or both. But the lack of detail allows for other interpretations, too; for example, Crane might be waiting on some sort of larger revelation, like the "multitudes" leaning toward the movie screen in the third stanza.

The next line is enigmatic, too: Crane doesn't explain why the bridge's shadow is, paradoxically, "clear" only in the "darkness." There might be *some* literal truth to this claim: under certain conditions, the lights on the bridge might throw sharper shadows at night than the sun creates by day. But the claim could also be metaphorical; for example, the "shadow" might represent *secrets* or hidden qualities associated with the bridge. These secrets might become clearer at night—for example, to people who know to meet "by the piers" for romantic trysts under the cover of darkness. Ultimately, the claim is somewhat mystical, challenging readers to find their own interpretations.

The stanza ends by zooming out to a wider view of New York City. Crane compares the glittering skyline to a set of "fiery parcels," or glowing packages, that have just been unwrapped ("undone"). He also mentions, for the first time, a winter setting: "Already snow submerges an iron year. . ." Snow is either falling or covering the ground, as if burying ("submerging") the "year" itself. These details suggest that the month is December, when people unwrap holiday packages and snow often begins in the northeastern U.S. Like a good holiday gift, the beauty of the "City"—including the bridge—seems to offer some consolation for a year that felt as hard and unyielding as "iron."

LINES 41-44

O Sleepless as ...
... myth to God.

The final stanza offers a kind of plea or prayer. By now, the poet has not only personified but, in many ways, deified the bridge. For Crane, this structure of iron and steel symbolizes the dreams and ideals of an entire people. Thus, he apostrophizes the bridge in the same way ancient poets invoked the gods—with a reverent "O" and a humble request:

> O Sleepless as the river under thee,
> Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
> Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
> And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

Crane gives the bridge the epithet "Sleepless," as though it were an ever-vigilant god. He compares it to the "river" it spans (the East River), which forever flows and never rests. (Remember, Crane thinks the bridge, too, looks incredibly fluid and dynamic). The description also evokes a famous nickname for New York City: "the city that never sleeps."

But in the next line, Crane suggests that the bridge reaches far beyond New York. With grand hyperbole, he claims that it "Vault[s]" over "the sea"—presumably the Atlantic Ocean—and "the prairies' dreaming sod," or the grassy plains of the American Midwest. ("Dreaming" might imply that the land is dormant or fallow during the wintertime; it also associates the land with the hopes and dreams of the American people.)

Of course, this claim can't literally be true: the bridge is barely a mile long! Metaphorically, however, it suggests that the bridge—and the dream it represents—binds all of America together. The imagery of line 42 faintly recalls the song "God Bless America" (1918), written and popularized just a few years before Crane's poem:

> From the mountains to the prairies
> To the oceans white with foam
> God bless America, my home sweet home!

This stanza isn't quite as patriotic or pious as Irving Berlin's song, but it conveys a similar spirit of optimism and pride. It frames the Brooklyn Bridge as a unifying symbol for the entire country and asks this giant monument to "descend" among the common people like a god. Indeed, Crane imagines the bridge swooping down to inspire even "us lowliest" citizens. He hopes that the bridge's transcendent beauty—including its graceful "curveship" or curvature—might "lend a myth to God," or offer a new source of belief in an age of disbelief. (The implication is that God needs the help: the old religious stories aren't cutting it anymore!) All in all, Crane invests the bridge with the hopes and aspirations of early 20th-century America—if not the entire modern world.

SYMBOLS

THE BRIDGE

Both in this introductory poem and throughout *The Bridge*, the Brooklyn Bridge serves as an extremely complex symbol.

In general, bridges are symbols of connection, since they join places together and facilitate back-and-forth travel. For Crane, the Brooklyn Bridge was a symbol of mass human connection in the modern age. Here, he portrays it as *bridging* people from all walks of life, including social outcasts ("pariah[s]"). In other words, it's a symbol of democracy and the "Liberty" it promises. Accordingly, Crane suggests that it embodies a unifying vision or foundational "myth" for all of America, from the "sea" to the "prairie[s]." (Indeed, the mention of ocean and prairie in the final stanza recalls the lyrics of "God Bless America.")

That's not to say that Crane views the bridge as a mere patriotic symbol. As an ambitious feat of modern engineering, as well as a functional piece of urban infrastructure, it seems to represent New York City or the modern city as a whole. And because it's a site of death as well as bustling life (note the suicide in stanza 5), it seems to bind together many disparate aspects of the human experience.

Broadly, Crane suggests that the bridge, in all its inspiring beauty, symbolizes something modern people can *believe* in. Like a temple, it seems to "condense eternity" into a single structure.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-44

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

After the three introductory stanzas, which help set the New York scene, the poem does exactly what its title suggests: delivers an apostrophe to the Brooklyn Bridge. To the poet, the bridge is as vibrant as a living being, almost a deity—and, in fact, the poem personifies the bridge on several occasions. (For example, it imagines the bridge as a "breath[ing]" creature, with "arms," that can "bestow" accolades and grant "reprieve[s].")

In fact, Crane borrows some effects that, traditionally, poets have often used to apostrophize gods. For example, he invokes the bridge with the exclamation "O" ("O harp and altar," "O Sleepless"). He also addresses the bridge with the archaic second-person pronouns "thee," "thou," "thy," and "thine," as though it were not only alive but worthy of special reverence. Even the capitalized word "Sleepless" is a kind of heroic epithet or reverent name for the bridge.

The tone of the apostrophe is not only reverent but passionate. Crane describes the bridge in lush, tender, somewhat hyperbolic terms ("And we have seen night lifted in thine arms") and breaks out in enthusiastic exclamations ("Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!"; "How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!"). Together, these effects frame the bridge as not only a beautiful monument but also a kind of religious icon, an emblem of modern hopes and aspirations.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-44

METAPHOR

"To Brooklyn Bridge" is so jam-packed with metaphor (and other figurative language) that it can be hard to tell where some metaphors start and end. This style is typical of Crane's poetry, which—as he once explained to an editor—uses a "logic of metaphor" that relies on words' connotations as well as their strict definitions. By playing on these connotations, Crane makes rapid, associative leaps from one figure of speech to the next. The result is a highly compressed word-picture that grabs the reader's attention but can take a few readings to puzzle out.

For an example of how this "logic" works, look at lines 21-22:

> Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
> A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;

These lines describe noon sunlight flashing off the Brooklyn Bridge and shining down nearby Wall Street. It's a simple enough image, but through his intricate metaphors, Crane makes it both strange and exceptionally vivid. In his description, "noon" itself "leaks" from the "girder[s]," or iron rails, of the bridge into the city "street." It's as if the dazzling sky were an "acetylene" torch, and a sharp jet—or fang-like "rip-tooth"—of its flame were shooting into the city. Notice how Crane's wording efficiently compresses several ideas and images together, so that each "leaks" fluidly into the next.

Notice, too, how the *connotations* of these words seem to say more than the lines say outright. The image of a "rip-tooth" might evoke a ripsaw (a type of cutting tool), a sharp-toothed animal ripping into its prey, or both. "Acetylene" conjures up images of heavy industry (acetylene torches are often used in welding). Implicitly, then, Crane associates the bridge with human industry and engineering (including the construction of the bridge itself), but also with a kind of ferocious natural power.

For one more example, look at lines 33-35, which describe the glow of nighttime traffic on the bridge:

> Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift

> Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
> Beading thy path—condense eternity:

To Crane, these "lights" (from car headlamps and traffic signals) resemble a string of beautiful "Bead[s]," or an exhalation of the "stars" themselves. Because they present a glimpse of heaven on earth, they seem to "condense eternity" into a single scene. The bridge they move across is so dynamic-looking that Crane compares it to a "swift / Unfractioned idiom"—a rapid, undivided burst of language. Once again, Crane's own language tries to emulate the bridge's fluidity and dynamism; his metaphors, and their underlying logic, are equally "swift" and "condense[d]."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-7
- Line 9
- Lines 13-15
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-27
- Lines 29-30
- Line 31
- Line 32
- Lines 33-35
- Line 36
- Line 39
- Line 40
- Line 42

ASSONANCE

"To Brooklyn Bridge" is a richly lyrical poem, and assonance is one of its major musical devices. Listen to all the short and long /i/ sounds that echo through lines 1-3, for example:

> How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
> The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
> Shedding white rings of tumult, building high [...]

Indeed, the /i/ sounds seem to "rippl[e]" throughout the opening lines, much as the water ripples around the resting gull. The internal rhymes between "rippling" and "dip" and "wings" and "rings" strengthen this reverberating effect. Overall, the assonance in these lines creates a powerful, propulsive rhythm, which fits the image of a bird waking and soaring up into the sky.

The poem is often most assonant when lavishing its highest praise on the Brooklyn Bridge. Take lines 14-16, for instance:

> [...] As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
> Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
> Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

The sudden explosion of short /e/, long /e/, and long /i/ sounds are a kind of verbal pyrotechnics, popping off as Crane celebrates the bridge he loves. A similar example occurs in lines 33-34:

> Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
> Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,

This dense, ear-pleasing cluster of short /i/ and short /a/ sounds (including the rhyming syllables in "Unfractioned" and "immaculate") seems to mimic the "condense[d]," beautiful lights across the bridge.

The final stanza is also full of assonance and internal rhyme ("Sleepless"/"thee"/"sea"/"dreaming," etc.), which contribute to its grand, hymn-like music and help bring the poem to a resounding close.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "chill," "his rippling"
- **Line 2:** "wings," "dip," "pivot him"
- **Line 3:** "Shedding," "white," "rings," "building," "high"
- **Line 4:** "chained bay"
- **Line 5:** "inviolate," "eyes"
- **Line 7:** "page," "away"
- **Line 14:** "step," "yet left"
- **Line 15:** "ever unspent," "thy stride"
- **Line 16:** "thy," "freedom," "thee"
- **Line 17:** "some subway scuttle"
- **Line 19:** "Tilting," "shrill"
- **Line 21:** "street," "leaks"
- **Line 30:** "align thy choiring"
- **Line 31:** "threshold," "pledge"
- **Line 33:** "traffic," "skim," "swift"
- **Line 34:** "Unfractioned," "idiom," "immaculate"
- **Line 36:** "night," "thine"
- **Line 41:** "Sleepless," "thee"
- **Line 42:** "sea," "dreaming"
- **Line 43:** "descend"
- **Line 44:** "lend"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem presents a series of juxtapositions, which add up to a multifaceted picture of the Brooklyn Bridge and modern city life.

In the first two stanzas, Crane juxtaposes a seagull—flying over

New York Harbor at dawn—with a miniature portrait of modern office life. The link here is a simile, as Crane compares the gull's distant flight to the sailboats an office worker might daydream about while staring at paperwork. In other words, he contrasts images of freedom and excitement with a scene of boredom and confinement, suggesting that modern people dream of the former while experiencing the latter.

In another surprising associative leap, he then juxtaposes these images with a description of a movie theater. In modern "cinemas," he claims, people flock to stare at screens that they imagine will "disclose[]" some revelatory vision. Whatever they're dreaming of "Never" quite arrives, but they keep flocking to the movies anyway, determined to keep dreaming. Thus, the cinema becomes another illustration of the tensions, frustrations, and hopes that haunt modern life.

Next, Crane juxtaposes *all* of these things with the main focus of the poem: the Brooklyn Bridge. For Crane, this bridge, more than anything else, seems to embody the modern (or American) dream in all its elusive beauty. The rest of the poem presents an extended description of the bridge, but this description itself includes a number of smaller juxtapositions. For example, Crane describes the bridge as it appears both in the "noon" sun and in the shadows of "night." He describes a suicidal person jumping off the bridge, but he also portrays himself "wait[ing]" under the bridge in a mood of romantic expectation. Through this collage-like technique, he suggests that the bridge—and the dream he associates with it—represents a vast number of things to a vast number of people.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses a wide variety of images and metaphors to capture the glory of Brooklyn Bridge. Some of these images and metaphors involve personification. Arguably, the first hint of this technique occurs in line 16, which exalts the "freedom" of the bridge. Since the bridge is a static object (one that "stay[s]" still), this freedom is figurative—almost a character trait rather than a physical fact.

A clearer example occurs in line 24, which describes the bridge, with its trembling "cable[]" wires, as "breath[ing]" the ocean air. Here, the poet imagines the bridge as a living creature, not just a dynamic-looking object.

Crane develops this idea further in the next stanza, which completes the personification. Not only does the bridge "breathe," it offers a "guerdon" (reward), "bestow[s]" a kind of "Accolade," and grants a kind of "pardon." Again, all these descriptions are figurative, but they have the effect of *humanizing* the bridge—or deifying it!

Later, Crane imagines the bridge as "lift[ing]" the entire "night" in its "arms," again in the manner of a human-like god. (Crane may be alluding here to a figure from Greek mythology: the giant Atlas, who is forced to hold up the heavens for eternity.) Finally, the last stanza describes the bridge as "Sleepless," "Vaulting," and capable of "lend[ing] a myth to God." Again, all these descriptions envision the bridge as having human qualities, even if these qualities are exaggerated to mythic proportions. Indeed, Crane's use of personification aligns here with his use of apostrophe: he addresses the bridge as "thee," "thou," etc., as if it were alive and worthy of the highest respect. These techniques emphasize that the bridge, while not literally alive, looks extremely dynamic and reflects the aspirations of its city and country.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!"
- **Lines 24-28:** "Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still. / And obscure as that heaven of the Jews, / Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow / Of anonymity time cannot raise: / Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show."
- **Line 36:** "And we have seen night lifted in thine arms."
- **Lines 41-44:** "O Sleepless as the river under thee, / Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod, / Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend / And of the curveship lend a myth to God."

VOCABULARY

Rippling rest (Line 1) - Seagulls often sleep on or near open water, so this phrase evokes a seagull resting (in New York Harbor) as water ripples around them.

Pivot (Line 2) - Turn, as if around a central point or axis.

Tumult (Line 3) - Disorder or disarray. (Here perhaps meant to evoke the messy "Shedding" of feathers.)

Chained bay waters (Line 4) - The "bay" here is New York Bay, a.k.a, New York Harbor. The harbor waters are metaphorically "chained" or confined within limits, by contrast with the open ocean.

Liberty (Line 4) - Refers to the freedom the rising seagull seems to "build[]" or create before the viewer's eyes, but also (because it's capitalized) invokes the Statue of Liberty, visible across New York Harbor from the Brooklyn Bridge.

Inviolate (Line 5) - Unspoiled; pure. Here indicates that the seagull traces a perfect-looking "curve" in the air.

Forsake (Line 5) - Abandon. (The gull "forsake[s]" the viewer's "eyes" in the sense that it flies out of sight.)

Apparitional (Line 6) - Ghost-like.

Page of figures (Line 7) - A paper with numbers or data on it;

here, a piece of office paperwork.

Panoramic (Line 9) - Presenting a panorama or wide-angle view of something. Here refers to the wide screens found in "cinemas."

Sleights (Line 9) - Artifices; skillful tricks or deceptions (as in the phrase "sleight of hand"). Metaphorically, Crane means that movie screens present skillful illusions.

Multitudes (Line 10) - Crowds (here meaning the audiences in movie theaters).

Disclosed (Line 11) - Revealed.

Hastened (Line 11) - Hurried, rushed (as in crowds rushing to movie theaters).

Silver-paced (Line 13) - A word of Crane's own invention, metaphorically suggesting that the sunlight seems to "pace[]" or "stride" across the sections of the bridge, throwing off a silvery glow in the process.

Thee/thou/thy/thine (Line 13, Line 14, Lines 14-15, Line 16, Line 24, Lines 25-26, Lines 26-27, Line 28, Line 30, Line 33, Line 35, Line 36, Line 37, Line 38, Line 41) - Old-fashioned, formal synonyms for "you" and "your."

The harbor (Line 13) - New York Harbor. The Brooklyn Bridge (here addressed as "Thee") spans the East River at the point where it flows into the harbor.

Ever (Line 15) - Forever; permanently.

Implicitly (Line 16) - Inherently. Crane seems to be suggesting that the bridge's "freedom" gives it an inherent, internal tension that paradoxically holds it in place.

Staying (Line 16) - Holding still; fixing in place.

Loft (Line 17) - A loft apartment (open-plan apartment similar to a studio).

Scuttle (Line 17) - Scramble; hustle and bustle (i.e., the bustling of the "subway" crowd).

Cell (Line 17) - Here referring to a jail cell or locked room in an asylum.

Bedlamite (Line 18) - A mentally ill person, especially one who has spent time in a mental health facility ("Bedlam" is the nickname of a famous psychiatric hospital in London).

Parapets (Line 18) - Barriers along the edges of a roof, bridge, etc. Here specifically referring to the barriers along the pedestrian walkways of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Momently (Line 19) - Momentarily.

Shrill shirt (Line 19) - Describes a shirt whistling and rippling ("ballooning") in the wind as its wearer tilts on the edge of the bridge.

Jest (Line 20) - Joke or prank. Here, a metaphor for the falling body of the suicidal jumper, whose jump resembles a whimsical stunt.

Caravan (Line 20) - A procession of vehicles (here referring to the traffic along the bridge).

Wall (Line 21) - Wall Street, a famous street in lower Manhattan.

Girder (Line 21) - A horizontal support beam (part of a bridge, as here, or a building).

Rip-tooth (Line 22) - Literally means the tooth of a ripsaw, but here metaphorically means a fang-shaped jet of acetylene from an acetylene torch—which, according to the poet, the bright "noon" sunlight resembles. (Crane's "logic of metaphor" relies on these kinds of highly compressed, associative comparisons.)

Acetylene (Line 22) - A chemical that burns at a high temperature and is found in welding torches. Here, part of a metaphor comparing the bright "noon" sunlight to the burning jet from an acetylene torch.

Derricks (Line 23) - Cranes used in loading and unloading ships.

Cloud-flown (Line 23) - Borne aloft or carried by clouds. (A metaphorical description of the dockside "derricks," whose mechanical arms turn in the sky.)

Cables (Line 24) - Heavy wire ropes (part of the structure of the Brooklyn Bridge).

Heaven of the Jews (Line 25) - A reference to the Jewish conception of the afterlife, which is "obscure" compared to the detailed descriptions found in Christian theology.

Guerdon (Lines 25-26) - Old-fashioned synonym for "reward." Here refers to the metaphorical reward (described more in the following lines) that the Brooklyn Bridge gives to those who experience it.

Accolade (Lines 26-27) - A compliment or honor. (Crane is suggesting that the bridge, with all its bustle and grandeur, gives people the honor or gift of "anonymity"; it sweeps them up into something larger than themselves.)

Bestow (Line 26) - Give.

Reprieve (Line 28) - Relief; absolution; excuse from hardship or punishment.

The fury (Line 29) - A fierce, avenging spirit from Greek mythology. (Crane is suggesting that the bridge is a fierce combination of artistry and spirituality, represented by the "harp" and "altar.")

Choiring strings (Line 30) - A metaphor for the cables of the Brooklyn Bridge (which the poet compares to the music-producing "strings" of a "harp").

Terrific (Line 31) - Amazing; grand; awe-inspiring.

Prophet's pledge (Line 31) - The promise or prediction made by a *prophet* (i.e., someone who issues divine revelations or insight into future events). Crane seems to mean, here, that the Brooklyn Bridge attracts religious and spiritual types, poets,

and so on.

Pariah (Line 32) - A social outcast. (Or multiple outcasts, since Crane is using the word as a plural here.)

Unfractioned (Lines 33-34) - Continuous; undivided.

Idiom (Lines 33-34) - A language, especially a local or distinctive one. (Crane is using the word metaphorically; the design of the Brooklyn Bridge reminds him of a distinctive, dynamic, fluently spoken language.)

The piers (Line 37) - Waterfront platforms used for loading and unloading ships, walking and recreation, etc. (There are a number of piers in the immediate vicinity of Brooklyn Bridge.)

Fiery parcels (Line 39) - A metaphor for the New York skyline at night, which the poet compares to a set of burning, glowing packages ("parcels") that have been unwrapped ("undone").

Submerges (Line 40) - Engulfs; buries.

The river under thee (Line 41) - Refers to the East River, which flows under the Brooklyn Bridge.

Sod (Line 42) - Turf; grassy soil.

Lowliest (Line 43) - Humblest ("us lowliest" suggests the poorest or most marginal members of society).

Curveship (Line 44) - Curving or arcing shape (a word Crane invented).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To Brooklyn Bridge" contains 11 quatrains (four-line stanzas) of iambic pentameter (five-beat lines that generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). Several stanzas contain rhymes, but the poem doesn't follow a regular rhyme scheme.

The consistent meter and stanza length give the poem a certain formal regularity—even a traditional quality, which seems to fit its lofty, spiritual tone. (The poem has been described as a *hymn* to the Brooklyn Bridge.) At the same time, Crane's irregular, intuitive rhyming is a mark of his modernism; like his contemporaries T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, he belonged to an era of poets who loved experimenting with traditional forms. Here and throughout his work, Crane strives for a language that's both musically lush and continually surprising. When end rhyme fits those purposes, he uses it, and when it doesn't, he doesn't. The rhymes become more consistent toward the end of the poem, however (notice "clear"/"year" and "sod"/"God" in stanzas 10 and 11, plus the near-rhyme "stars"/"arms" in stanza 9). The accumulating rhymes give these quatrains a little extra resonance and bring the poem to a stirring close.

METER

The poem uses the most common meter in English poetry: iambic pentameter. This means that its lines typically contain 10 syllables arranged in a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm. Listen to how this pattern sounds in line 2, for example:

> The sea- | gull's wings | shall dip | and pi- | vot him,

However, most metrical poems contain rhythmic variations, and Crane's poetry, in particular, is full of complex and surprising rhythmic effects. Notice how the pattern changes in lines 3-4:

> Shedding | white rings | of tu- | mult, buil- | ding high
> Over | the chained | bay wa- | ters Li- | berty—

Notice the extra stressed syllables and other departures from strict pentameter. These variations make the lines sound a littler heavier and rougher, as if to illustrate the seagull's difficult, "tumult[uous]," yet powerful ascent.

In general, Crane's handling of meter creates a rich, full, imposing sound, which some critics have compared to the Elizabethan poetry (e.g., Christopher Marlowe's verse plays) that Crane revered. Here and throughout *The Bridge*, this lofty musicality fits the poem's high tone and sweeping, "panoramic" imagery.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses rhyme in an irregular, seemingly spontaneous fashion; it never settles into a strict scheme. The first full rhyme in the poem occurs in the second stanza (lines 7-8):

> Some page of figures to be filed away;
> —Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

Other stanzas rhyme on the second and fourth lines (stanzas 3, 7, 10, and 11). The ninth stanza contains a near rhyme: "stars"/"arms." These rhymes provide occasional moments of emphasis or heightened musicality, and in the final stanzas, they help bring the poem to a ringing close. At the same time, they show that Crane—who loved jazz and other experimental music as well as modernist poetry—used rhyme more as an intuitive, impromptu effect than as a rigid structuring device.

SPEAKER

The poem has an unidentified first-person speaker, who speaks in both the singular ("I") and the plural ("we"). Since Hart Crane lived in New York City for a number of years—including in a house with a spectacular view of Brooklyn Bridge—and celebrated the bridge in letters as well as poems, it's fair to assume the speaker here is the poet.

When speaking as "we," he seems to adopt the collective voice of New York City, including all the office workers who dream of

freedom and escape during "our day[s]." (Crane worked unhappily in the New York advertising industry for a time.) In some ways, this communal, celebratory American voice resembles the poetic persona of Walt Whitman, whose "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) was a major inspiration for Crane's poem.

Though the speaker doesn't reveal much about himself as an individual, his reference to waiting "by the piers" around Brooklyn Bridge is often read as a coded reference to gay cruising. During Crane's time, the area around the Brooklyn side of the bridge was a common meetup spot for gay men, whose sexuality made them potential "pariah[s]" in a homophobic age. This is one reason Crane viewed the bridge as a romantic as well as a spiritual symbol.

SETTING

The poem is set in New York City, particularly on and around the Brooklyn Bridge, which joins the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan. The speaker seems to view New York as the epicenter of modern life and the bridge as its defining monument.

Along with the bridge itself, the speaker mentions a number of New York features and landmarks. These include New York Harbor (the "bay waters" in line 4 and "the harbor" in line 13), the "subway" (line 17), "Wall" Street (line 21), "the piers" near the bridge (line 37), and the East River ("the river under" the bridge, line 41). The capitalized "Liberty" in line 4 calls to mind the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, while "the City's fiery parcels" (line 39) evokes the bright, angular shape of the city skyline. (The "snow" in line 40 indicates that the speaker is observing the city in winter, though the references to both "sun" and "night" suggest that this is a scene sketched over time.) The speaker also mentions other, less New York-specific features of the urban landscape, including "elevators," "cinemas," dockside "derricks," and "traffic lights."

The poem zooms out to encompass a wider geography, too. Line 24 gestures toward the "North Atlantic" Ocean of which New York Harbor is a small part, while line 42 hyperbolically imagines that the bridge "Vault[s]" all the way from "the sea" to "the prairies[]" of the Midwest. Symbolically, this image implies that the bridge, or the spirit it represents, joins all of America together.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Hart Crane (1899-1932) was one of the most precocious and ambitious poets of the modernist generation. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, modernist writers challenged the literary norms they had inherited from the 19th century. These norms were both formal—related to the structure and style of poems, plays, and novels—and social: feminism, working-class life, and frank depictions of sex all became subjects for serious literature during this period. So did modern technology, which was evolving at a rapid clip, and the modern urban landscape, which held particular appeal for Crane. Other major poets of the modernist movement included William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, whose pessimistic outlook Crane tried to counter in his work.

"To Brooklyn Bridge" is the "Proem," or introductory poem, of Crane's magnum opus *The Bridge* (1930). Crane called this sequence of 15 poems, which he wrote between 1923 and 1929, "a synthesis of America and its identity." Though it ranges over a wide swath of history and geography, its central image remains the Brooklyn Bridge, which takes on a variety of symbolic meanings over the course of the sequence. Crane loved the bridge and even lived near it for a time, at 110 Columbia Heights in Brooklyn. As he wrote to his mother and grandmother in the mid-1920s:

> Just imagine looking out your window directly on the East River with nothing intervening between your view of the Statue of Liberty, way down the harbour, and the marvelous beauty of Brooklyn Bridge close above you on your right! [...] It's really a magnificent place to live.

The final section of *The Bridge*, "Atlantis," also contains grand, incantatory descriptions of the bridge and surrounding harbor. In this way, "To Brooklyn Bridge" and "Atlantis" form a pair of bookends for the sequence.

In its portrait of a vibrant, mythic New York City, "To Brooklyn Bridge" also takes inspiration from older American poetry. Its elevation of a New York monument to a world symbol recalls Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (1883), the poem featured at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) is an even clearer influence, not only because Whitman was one of Crane's poetic idols but also because the Brooklyn Bridge spans the former route of the Brooklyn Ferry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Crane described *The Bridge* as "symphonic": an ambitious attempt to sum up "the American experience" and modern city life in a single poetic sequence. *The Bridge* was also, in part, a response to T. S. Eliot's celebrated long poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which captured the bleakness, fragmentation, and spiritual decay of the post-World War I era. Though Crane admired Eliot's talent, he complained that *The Waste Land* was "good, of course, but so damned dead." With *The Bridge*, he

sought to create a mini-epic of his own, one that offered a more dynamic and optimistic portrait of the modern era.

By 1930, when Crane's book was published, New York City had reached a population of about 7 million and become, in many ways, the financial and cultural capital of the modern world. Then as now, Wall Street (mentioned in line 21) was synonymous with the U.S. economy, which had boomed throughout the 1920s—though it was nosediving into the Great Depression by the time *The Bridge* appeared. The New York skyline had become emblematic of America's soaring ambitions as a world power; some of the city's best-known skyscrapers—including the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building—were under construction around the time *The Bridge* came out. Monuments like the Statue of Liberty (alluded to in lines 3-4) and the Brooklyn Bridge itself (completed in 1883) had become iconic landmarks, symbols of the promise that New York—and America—claimed to offer the world.

"To Brooklyn Bridge," and *The Bridge* as a whole, extends something of the same promise, which for Crane amounted to a complex version of the American Dream. The poem celebrates the bridge not only as a symbol of "freedom" but as the source of a bold new "myth," one that might restore a kind of faith and optimism in a turbulent postwar age. In fact, Crane hoped that *The Bridge* would provide nothing less than "a mystical synthesis of 'America.'"

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — A biography of Crane at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/hart-crane)
- Modernism 101 — An introduction to the groundbreaking poetic movement with which Crane was associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "To Brooklyn Bridge." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWTVD9Ox4Qs)
- Crane on "The Logic of Metaphor" — Crane's explanation of his dense poetic style, which conveys much of its meaning through "connotations" and metaphorical associations, as opposed to the "logically rigid" definitions of words. (https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/smonte10/files/2010/08/Hart-Crane-Letter.pdf)
- A Hart Crane Documentary — Watch a short film about Crane from the Voices and Visions series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3YfI_aXBWU)

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