William Street

SUMMARY

The speaker describes how the neon lights of William Street look on a rainy night. A circle of red light, green light the color of liquor, and flashing arrows reflect off the ground, as though spreading flames across the pavement. The wet street is like a deep river of light. While some people might find this repulsive, the speaker thinks it's beautiful.

Empty pants hang on display in pawn-shop windows like dead men, one pair knocking knees with another. Now that no one's wearing these pants, they're free from suffering or judgment. While some people might find this repulsive, the speaker thinks it's beautiful.

The air is filled with the intense, scratchy smells of cigarette smoke, animal fat, and fish; with the smell of kerosene oil, which makes people's noses scrunch up in disgust; with the smell and hiss of onions cooking in hot grease. While some people might find this repulsive, the speaker thinks it's beautiful.

The drunks and sex workers, with their flippant attitudes and glassy-eyed stares, who are near death and almost starving, roam the pavements of this urban meadow. While some people might find this repulsive, the speaker thinks it's beautiful.

THEMES

THE INTENSE BEAUTY OF CITY LIFE

Kenneth Slessor's "William Steet" celebrates city life, finding beauty even in its supposed ugliness. The poem, inspired by the William Street of 1930s Sydney, Australia, vividly depicts the sights, sounds, and smells of a busy urban area. The speaker acknowledges that some might find this scene to be frightening, seedy, and unforgiving. To the speaker, however, it's "lovely"—perhaps because it's a more authentic reflection of human suffering and desire.

The speaker has a point to prove, addressing an unspecified "You" throughout the poem who presumably represents someone with typical attitudes about the city. Most people, the poem suggests, would find a place like William Street "ugly"; they'd prefer a cleaner, safer, more sanitized environment, or, perhaps, the more traditional beauty of the natural world.

The speaker does admit that William Street is a pretty bleak place, filled with poverty, suffering, and danger. For example, "pawn-shop windows" display second-hand trousers like "hung men," their empty presence a reminder of their previous owners' absence. Given that Slessor wrote this poem in the 1930s, these ghostly trousers perhaps once belonged to men who died or had to sell everything they owned during the Great Depression. The street is also home to glassy-eyed alcoholics ("dips") and sex workers ("molls"), who are always one stumble away from death or starvation.

In brief sketches like these, the poem hints at a backdrop of misery behind the flashy lights. And yet, the speaker finds this urban world—so seemingly terrible on paper—to be "lovely." That's because, the poem implies, William Street is utterly unfiltered and thrilling. The reflection of glaring neon lights on the wet pavement is like a "running fire" spreading across "the stones," frightening yet remarkably vivid and alive. Likewise, the "rich and rasping" smells of cigarette smoke, fish, paraffin lamps, and onions being fried in grease fill the air. While not traditionally pleasant, these scents are undeniably *intense*. If nothing else, then, William Street is captivating and unignorable.

But the poem implies that it's not just the sensory stimuli that make William Street "lovely" in the speaker's eyes. The glaring neon lights and garish advertisements (e.g., those "pulsing arrows") "go deeper than a stream," the speaker says, suggesting that they're more meaningful, evocative, and revealing about modern life than a pastoral scene could ever be. That is, the speaker senses some sort of deep *truth* in this urban scene about what it means to be human.

Perhaps that's because the city doesn't sugarcoat or gloss over human hardship. On the contrary, suffering and desire on William Street are all out in the open, existing side-by-side with the rich sensory delights on offer. It's this honesty, it seems, that the speaker so admires.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The red globe ...
... find it lovely.

As the title reveals, the setting here is William Street, a real location in Sydney, Australia, that, at the time Slessor wrote the poem, was a site of poverty, prostitution, and crime. Slessor said that "William Street" is:

> [...] a sort of flashlight photograph of the swarming city channel that runs up the hill to Kings Cross, taken on a rainy night when the surface of the road is

coated with a slick of reds and greens and whites reflected from the neon skysigns (the "red globes" and "pulsing arrows").

Readers don't need to know anything about the real William Street to picture this setting, however, thanks to the speaker's vivid imagery. This opening stanza focuses on the bright lights of this urban world:

- The mention of red light subtly alludes to red-light districts, so named for the traditional red light used to signify brothels.
- The garish "liquor green" perhaps stems from traffic lights or more of those "skysigns."
- The "pulsing arrows" perhaps refer to the neon "Dunlop Tyre" sign, or to some other business's advertisement.
- The "running fire" might refer the lights of cars or trams that illuminate the surface of the road, cigarette ash as it hits the pavement, and/or the reflection of all these neon signs on the wet ground. Notice how the alliteration of "spilt on the stones" has a hissing, fire-like sound that matches the image.

This imagery is at once immediate *and* alienating; readers can picture the stark colors of this nighttime scene but it's not entirely clear where they're coming from. The scene thus feels impressionistic, like a confusing, thrilling burst of light and color. It's as though this world moves so rapidly that its colors can't quite be pinned down.

In the poem's third line, the speaker declares that all these lights "go deeper than a stream." This comparison juxtaposes the city and the natural world, finding more heft in the "stream" of all those lights. "Deeper" suggests that, for the speaker, William Street is less superficial than a pleasant but meaningless pastoral scene. The shapes and impressions of the street—the bold redness of the light, the pulsating motion of the arrows, the continuous stream of fire-like reflections—reveal something "deeper" about humanity and life.

Line 4 summarizes the poem's main idea (which becomes a refrain at the end of each stanza): "You find this ugly, I find it lovely." This antithesis suggests that most people—the collective "You" the speaker addresses—find places like William Street to be both aesthetically and morally repulsive. The speaker, by contrast, finds beauty in the urban scene, implicitly because it's "deeper," more meaningful and moving, than a simple, natural scene. The asyndeton in the phrase—the lack of an "and"—makes the contrast all the more striking.

Finally, the poem uses a loose iambic pentameter and a subtle ABAC rhyme scheme in each quatrain. Iambic pentameter means that each line contains five iambs, poetic feet that consist of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM).

On one level, this bouncy meter and rhyme make the poem feel like a jaunty stroll down the street. The rhymes are slant, however ("green"/"stream"), and this meter is quite unsteady. Just look at how many variations appear in the first three lines:

> The red globe | of light, | the li- | quor green,
> the pul- | sing ar- | rows and | the run- | ning fire
> spilt on | the stones, | go deep- | er than | a stream;

There's some steady music in the background that evokes the hum of city life, yet the poem still feels chaotic and unpredictable.

LINES 5-8

Ghosts' trousers, like ...
... find it lovely.

In the poem's second quatrain, the speaker moves away from the bright lights of the street and zooms into a "pawn-shop window," where empty "trousers" (pants) are on display like a "dangle of hung men"—that is, like the bodies of men who have hanged themselves.

These lines thus present William Street as a place of suffering and sorrow:

- Pawnshops offer people loans in exchange for their personal property, which is held by the shop as collateral and resold if the person fails (or decides not) to repay the loan. The men who owned these trousers must have been desperate for money if they had to sell their own clothing.
- Remember, too, that poem was written during the Great Depression. Though it began in the U.S., the Depression was a worldwide economic catastrophe whose effects were felt as far as Slessor's Australia. These trousers likely belonged to men who lost their jobs in the Depression and thus symbolize the suffering and economic hardship of the 1930s.

The trousers now belong to "Ghosts," their previous owners either literally dead or figuratively shells of their former selves, having lost their sense of purpose and dignity. Now, there's "none inside [the trousers] to suffer or condemn"—that is, the trousers are free from the pain and self-loathing that evidently plagued the men who once wore them. And the fact that the trousers bump "knee to knee" reveals that there are plenty of pairs up for sale. In other words, William Street has seen *a lot* of desperate people.

Again, though, the speaker finds the scene "lovely." Perhaps that's because there's something refreshingly honest about the trousers. On William Street, the true depths of suffering are on display rather than hidden from view.

The stanza then ends exactly like all the others: with a refrain of line 4. Throughout the poem, this builds the juxtaposition between the speaker's celebration of William Street and the fact that most people would find it to be a seedy, unappealing place.

LINES 9-12

Smells rich and ...
... find it lovely.

The speaker turns away from the sad scene in the "pawn-shop windows" and focuses on the rich, striking smells of William Street.

The first stanza focused on *visual* imagery, as the speaker vividly described the bright, pulsing lights of the city at night. Now, the speaker turns to the intense, varied *smells* that fill the air.

Like everything else about William Street, lots of people would find these smells repugnant ("ugly"). The speaker, though, sounds like they're practically in heaven! These lines are thick with consonance and alliteration that add richness and intensity to the language and make the speaker sound positively rapturous:

> Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish
> and puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,

The use of polysyndeton ("smoke and fat and fish /and puffs") conveys the speaker's excitement (*"It smells like this and this and this!"*) while also suggesting that this list of smells could go on and on. Like the lights in the first stanza, these smells come thick and fast.

In line 11, sibilance conveys the distinctive "hiss" of onions hitting a hot greasy pan:

> of grease that blesses onions with a hiss;

This line is onomatopoeic, those sibilant consonants evoking the sound—and, with it, the smell—of onions frying.

"Blesses" is also a significant word choice here, subtly strengthening the idea that, contrary to popular opinion, there is something special, even holy, about William Street and its intense urban reality.

What these smells all have in common is that they're strong; these aren't delicate, traditionally pleasant odors like the scent of wildflowers or perfume. These are the smells of cooking, cigarettes, exhaust, and oil (paraffin is akin to kerosene, an oil that was often used in cooking and heating at the time Slessor wrote). The speaker refers to how the paraffin smell in particular "crimp[s] the nose"—that is, makes people's noses wrinkle up. Yet the speaker still finds it all "lovely," perhaps because these are the smells of *life* happening all around them.

LINES 13-16

The dips and ...
... find it lovely.

For the first time in the poem, the speaker describes some of the human beings who occupy William Street: the "dips and molls," or alcoholics and sex workers. ("Dips" derives from *dipsomania*, an old term for uncontrollable alcohol cravings. "Molls" comes from the woman's name "Molly," and is an old euphemism for a prostitute or promiscuous woman.)

These people have a "flip and shiny gaze," the speaker continues. "Flip" means unserious or glib, while "shiny" suggests the glassy pallor of their eyes, glazed over with drunkenness, boredom, jadedness, etc.

Line 14 reveals that the speaker has no false illusions about the difficulty of surviving on William Street, which the poem presents as a tough, dangerous, and impoverished place. The "dips and molls" have "death at their elbows," as though the Grim Reaper is tugging at their sleeves. Hunger, meanwhile, is nipping "at their heels." The alliteration of "hunger" and "heels" has a breathless, desperate quality that perfectly captures the spirit of the street.

William Street, then, is a place where people simply try to stay alive from one moment to the next, never knowing when their time might be up. But there's also, perhaps, a sense of freedom in this proximity to suffering and death. Whereas other parts of town might try and hide the "ugly" side of life, everything is out in the open on William Street.

The speaker adds that these people are "Ranging the pavements of their pasturage," metaphorically comparing this chunk of city to land used for pasture. The pavement is where the "dips and molls" do their grazing (of alcohol or clientele):

- In a way, this patch of the city is *theirs* to roam. The alliteration of "pavements" and "pasturage" joins the two words together, creating a link between the environment with its role in people's lives. The choice of "pasturage" here also develops the poem's juxtaposition of the urban environment and the countryside.
- On the other hand, farm animals are also essentially *prisoners* of that farm; likewise, the inhabitants of William Street are trapped there by circumstance, even if they are free to "range" the pavements.

By now, the reader expects the refrain that ends the poem:

> You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

It's as though the speaker stands on the pavement of William Street, gesturing all around them, urging the reader to see the beauty in its ugliness.

SYMBOLS

THE TROUSERS

In the poem's second stanza, the speaker describes trousers on display "in paw-shop-windows." These trousers symbolize the suffering and economic hardship of the Great Depression, which was a time of rampant unemployment and poverty.

A pawnshop is a store where people offer up their belongings as collateral for loans. It works like this: a person brings an item to a pawn shop in exchange for money, and the pawnbroker then holds onto that item until the money is returned. If the person can't or decides not to repay the loan, the shop will simply sell their item to other customers.

The trousers, then, suggest desperation and despair. Their former owners were presumably in such dire need of food, rent money, etc. that they had to sell their own clothing. In saying that they belong to "Ghosts," the speaker suggests that the men who pawned these pants are either literally dead or have become mere phantoms of their former selves in the absence of a steady job. That is, they've lost their sense of purpose and dignity.

The way the trousers "dangle" in the window makes them look like the bodies of hanged men, further strengthening their symbolic link with suffering. Now, though, the pants are empty; there are no human beings to "suffer or condemn"—to fill them with despair and self-loathing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men, / in pawn-shop windows, bumping knee by knee, / but none inside to suffer or condemn;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"William Street" uses alliteration to bring its evocative imagery to life on the page. Alliteration—along with the related devices consonance, sibilance, and assonance—makes the sights and the smells of William street more vivid and intense.

Listen to the alliteration in the first stanza, for example:

> The red globe of light, the liquor green,
> [...]
> spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;

The flurry of repeated sounds evokes the chaotic, swirling mass of lights. Shared sounds also create the impression that all these lights are bleeding together, as in long-exposure photography.

The alliteration gets even louder in the third stanza:

> Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish
> and puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,

The rush of sounds conveys just how overwhelming the smells of the street are. The consonance and sibilance within words add to the effect ("rasping," "puffs of paraffin," "crimp").

In the poem's final stanza, /h/ alliteration of "hunger at their heels" draws readers' attention to the fact that the people of William Street are engaged in a constant struggle to survive. The breathiness of that /h/ sounds even suggests the breathlessness with which these "dips and molls" try to outrun their hunger. These people roam "the pavements of their pasturage," the speaker says, alliteration again adding emphasis to an important image in the poem: the urban jungle as a "pasturage," or grazing ground, for society's less fortunate.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "globe," "light," "liquor," "green"
- **Line 3:** "spilt," "stones," "stream"
- **Line 9:** "Smells," "rich," "rasping," "smoke," "fat," "fish"
- **Line 10:** "puffs," "paraffin"
- **Line 14:** "hunger," "heels"
- **Lines 15-15:** "p / avements"
- **Line 15:** "pasturage"

IMAGERY

"William Street" relies on vivid imagery to convey the intense sights and smells of the city.

Slessor called this poem "a sort of flashlight photograph of the swarming city channel that runs up the hill to Kings Cross, taken on a rainy night when the surface of the road is coated with a slick of reds and greens and whites reflected from the neon skysigns."

The first stanza zooms in on those neon lights, which seem to bleed together into a "pulsing" swirl of "fire" in the rain:

> The red globe of light, the liquor green,
> the pulsing arrows and the running fire
> spilt on the stones, [...]

That "red globe of light" might nod to those lights traditionally used to mark brothels (hence the term "red-light district"), given that the poem mentions sex workers in the final stanza. The garish "green" is probably another neon sign, while the "running fire / spilt on the stones" might refer to the lights of cars and trams reflecting off the road's wet surface. The speaker doesn't grant any context, however, instead thrusting

the reader right into the middle of this city scene without explaining fully what's going on.

"William Street" also juxtaposes the urban and the pastoral world in this first stanza, as the speaker contrasts the way these lights spill across the pavement with a "stream." The metaphorical river of light is "deeper than a stream," the speaker specifically says, suggesting that there's something more powerful and evocative about this urban landscape that any stream found in nature.

The speaker focuses on "pawn-shop windows" in the next stanza, describing empty trousers on display like "the dangle of hung men." This striking simile at once conveys the ghostly image of empty trousers dangling in a window while also hinting that the misery and poverty of the Great Depression (which was happening when Slessor wrote this poem).

The third stanza then features the poem's most vivid imagery of all:

> Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish
> and puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,
> of grease that blesses onions with a hiss;

These scents practically leap off the page. Consonance, alliteration, and sibilance enhance the imagery as well; the lines are thick and rich with sounds in a way that evokes the intensity and richness of these smells. The word "rasping" suggests that the scents are particularly rough on the nostrils (indeed, in the next line the speaker says that they "crimp the nose," or make people wriggle their noses in disgust).

The many /s/ sounds also convey the "hiss" of "smoke" (from cigarettes and, perhaps, vehicle exhaust) and those "onions" frying in "grease." The lines simply *feel* grimy, sharp, and overwhelming.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 13-15

ANTITHESIS

The poem's refrain is also an example of antithesis, as the speaker contrasts their own conception of William Street with the way most people would view such a grungy scene:

> You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

The speaker finds this urban chaos and grime "lovely," but says that the poem's addressee—"You"—finds it "ugly." With no specifics about this "You," it's fair to assume that it's meant in a general, collective sense. That is, *most* people find William Street, with its overwhelming sights and smells, unpleasant and repugnant. Line 3's mention of a stream suggests that such people would prefer a more pastoral, countryside environment. The speaker, on the other hand, sees the beauty in this mess.

Asyndeton—the lack of a conjunction word like "and"—heightens this divide between "You" and the speaker. Note, too, how the two contrasting viewpoints also exist on either side of a caesura, utterly separate.

Note that the speaker doesn't say that the scene *is* lovely or ugly, only that people *find* it to be one way or the other. The poem's antithesis emphasizes that it's all a question of *perspective*, with the speaker arguing in favor of looking at William Street with fresh eyes. That is, the poem suggests that the urban world can be beautiful if one is looking at it the right way (implicitly as a true, "deeper" reflection of the reality of human life, suffering, and desire).

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "You find this ugly, I find it lovely."
- **Line 8:** "You find this ugly, I find it lovely."
- **Line 12:** "You find it ugly, I find it lovely."
- **Line 16:** "You find this ugly, I find it lovely."

POLYSYNDETON

The speaker uses polysyndeton in the third stanza when describing the "rich and rasping" smells of William Street:

> Smells rich and rasping, smoke **and** fat **and** fish
> **and** puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,

The speaker's repeated use of the conjunction "and" makes all those sensory impressions pile up in a rush. They come at the reader thick and fast—just like they would to someone on the street at the time. The polysyndeton *links* the different smells, evoking what it's like to stand on William Street with all these odors hitting the nostrils at once.

The use of "and" also makes these smells read like a small selection of a potentially *endless* list. In other words, the speaker could keep naming more William Street smells, but limits it to those mentioned in the poem.

Interestingly, there's asyndeton—the opposite device—in the next line:

> and puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,
> of grease that blesses onions with a hiss;

Here, the *lack* of any conjunction speeds up the poem and conveys the street's exciting atmosphere.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "smoke and fat and fish / and puffs"

REPETITION

Repetition helps the speaker make the argument that William Street—despite what most people would think—is a "lovely" place.

The most obvious repetition in the poem is its refrain. Every stanza without exception ends with the same line:

> You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

There is a minor variation in the third stanza when the speaker says, "You find **it** ugly," but the gist is the same. All this repetition hammers home the speaker's belief that William Street is a beautiful place, despite or even *because* of its surface-level ugliness.

As previously noted in this guide, this refrain is also an example of the device known as antithesis. The speaker uses parallel phrasing *within* the refrain to emphasize these two different perspectives on city life:

> You **find** this ugly, I **find** it lovely.

The poem also uses anaphora/parallelism in the opening two lines:

> **The** red globe of light, **the** liquor green,
> **the** pulsing arrows and **the** running fire

This repetition adds propulsive rhythm to the poem's language, evoking the chaos and energy of the city.

Finally, note the diacope of line 6:

> in pawn-shop windows, bumping **knee** by **knee**,

This repetition emphasizes that there are a lot of pairs of trousers for sale—meaning there were a lot of men desperate enough to pawn off their own clothing for money.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The red globe of light, the liquor green, / the pulsing arrows and the running fire"
- **Line 6:** "knee by knee"
- **Line 8:** "You find this ugly, I find it lovely."
- **Line 9:** "and," "and"
- **Line 10:** "and"
- **Line 12:** "You find it ugly, I find it lovely."
- **Line 16:** "You find this ugly, I find it lovely."

SIBILANCE

Sibilance helps to conjure the sights and smells of William Street. The smooth /s/ sounds of line 3, for example, subtly evoke the "spilt" light that snakes along the pavement "stones" like deep river water:

> spilt on the **s**tones, go deeper than a **s**tream;

The strongest sibilance comes in the third stanza, however, as the speaker describes the various odors that strike the nose on William Street. Listen to all the /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds here, as well as fricative /f/ sounds that enhance the sibilant effect:

> **S**mells rich and ra**s**ping, **s**moke and **f**at and **f**ish
> and pu**ff**s of para**ff**in that crimp the nose,
> of grease that ble**ss**es onions with a hi**ss**;

Readers can sense those thick odors wafting through the air and hear the "hiss" of food being pan-fried. Line 11 is practically onomatopoeic, in fact, capturing the "blesse[d]" moment when the onions hit the hot oil.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "spilt," "stones," "stream"
- **Line 9:** "Smells," "rasping," "smoke," "fish"
- **Line 10:** "puffs," "nose"
- **Line 11:** "grease," "blesses onions," "hiss"

VOCABULARY

William Street () - A road in Sydney, Australia, once infamous for its poverty, crime, and prostitution.

Dangle of hung men (Line 5) - The speaker is saying that the pawnshop trousers look like the legs of dead men loosely swinging in the window.

Pawn-shop (Line 6) - A shop where people can put up their personal belongings as collateral for cash loans.

Rasping (Line 9) - Harsh, rough, or scratchy. The smells irritate people's noses.

Paraffin (Line 10) - A.k.a. kerosene. A type of fuel once commonly used in lamps and cooking.

Crimp (Line 10) - Scrunch up. In other words, these smells make people wrinkle their noses.

Dips and Molls (Line 13) - Alcoholics and sex workers.

Flip (Line 13) - Flippant; jaded or unserious.

Ranging (Line 15) - Wandering over.

Pasturage (Line 15) - Fields used for grazing.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"William Street" consists of four quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas). Each quatrain is like a self-contained snapshot of a different part of this world: the first stanza focuses on the bright lights; the second on "pawn-shop windows"; the third on "rich and rasping smells"; and the fourth on the "dips and molls" (alcoholics and sex workers) who roam the street.

This steady, episodic structure suggests that the speaker takes all of this in stride (other city poems, for example, might have wildly different stanza lengths to reflect the chaos of the urban environment).

The poem is also structured around its refrain, as each stanza ends with (almost) the same sentence:

> You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

The speaker assumes that most people wouldn't like William Street all that much, given that it's such a far cry from the peaceful pastoral scenes often praised in poetry. In a way, then this poem can be read as a kind of *anti*-pastoral, or as an *urban* pastoral—an appreciation of what people usually consider ugly over the more traditional beauty of the natural world.

METER

"William Street" uses iambic pentameter, but it's very loose.

A line of iambic pentameter contains five iambs, poetic feet that consist of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Here's line 13 for an example of this meter in action:

> The dips | and molls, | with flip | and shi- | ny gaze

While most of the lines here stick to 10 syllables or so, the iambic rhythm changes quite a bit. Take like 5:

> Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,

Metrical variations like this keep the poem from feeling too strict or rigid. William Street, as presented here, is an intense, chaotic place, so it makes sense that Slessor played with the meter so much. There's an underlying iambic pulse to the poem that evokes the humming energy of city life, yet there are also plenty of unpredictable moments bursting through and disrupting this rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

"William Street" follows the rhyme scheme ABAC. In other words, the first and third lines of each stanza rhyme, while the second and fourth don't.

Here's stanza 1:

> [...] green, A
> [...] fire B
> [...] stream; A
> [...] lovely. C

This pattern lends the poem some casual music. At the same time, notice that the rhymes are all slant: green/stream, men/condemn, fish/hiss, gaze/pasturage. As a result, the poem's music feels slightly off-kilter. This subtly reflects the speaker's point: urban life might not be traditionally "lovely" (it lacks clean, clear, perfect rhymes) but the speaker takes pleasure in it nonetheless.

SPEAKER

Readers don't learn anything about the first-person speaker of "William Street" apart from the fact that they find city life, with all its garish lights and smells, beautiful. The speaker feels different from an unnamed "You," who likely represents society more broadly. "You" don't like the city, finding its grime, chaos, and poverty "ugly" and distasteful. The speaker, by contrast, is able to see the beauty of urban life. They find William Street to be an enthralling, sensuous, and above all "lovely" place (as they state repeatedly in the poem's refrain).

Because the poem keeps its characters general, readers might find themselves identifying more with the speaker or with the "You" they set themselves against.

SETTING

The poem is set, of course, on "William Street." This is a real place in Sydney, Australia. Now a business district, the area was once marked by crime and poverty. The poem is also likely set in the 1930s when Slessor wrote it; the mention of trousers hanging in a pawn shop window nods to the realities of the Great Depression, which left millions out of work and desperate for income.

That said, the poem itself never mentions William Street by name, and its description city could apply to any number of urban streets that are filled with bright lights, seedy storefronts, and nose-crinkling smells.

The poem more specifically takes place on a rainy night, when the garish light from neon street signs bounces off the wet pavement, the smells of smoke and cooking fill the air, and "dips and molls" (alcoholics and sex workers) roam "their pasturage"—the urban meadow where they graze for booze and clientele. The mention of dips and molls, like the mention of pawned trousers, nods to the darker side of city life. Some inhabitants of this world are struggling to survive from one moment to the next, barely one step ahead of "death" and "hunger."

Still, the speaker finds beauty in the street's intensity and chaos. This is perhaps because the street is filled with vivid and authentic *life*. The mention of "pasturage" also adds to the poem's subtle juxtaposition between the city and the countryside, a more traditionally beautiful environment that's often praised in poetry. The lights of William Street "go deeper than a stream," however, implying that they evoke something in the speaker that nature never could.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"William Street" was published in Kenneth Slessor's 1939 collection *Five Bells: XX poems*. Slessor (1901-1971) was one of Australia's most influential poets, particularly known for helping to steer his nation's poetry away from "bush ballads" (a genre of poetry that depicted life in undeveloped parts of Australia in simple, rhyming verse) and toward modernism.

Modernism was a broad cultural, philosophical, and artistic movement that arose in response to the rapid technological shifts of the late 19th/early 20th centuries as well as the horrors of World War I. Modernist poets rejected the strict formalism and aesthetic ideals of the past. They instead wrote using looser meters or outright free verse and turned away from the Romantic focus on the sublime beauty of the natural world. Australian modernism began later than American and European modernism, but it was in full swing when Slessor wrote this poem.

While bush poets like Banjo Peters and Henry Lawson (who wrote his own, far less celebratory "William Street") tended to equate rural life with Australian identity, Slessor's "William Street" presents city life as equally rich, varied, and valuable. And with its evocative urban imagery and subversion of the pastoral tradition (i.e., poetry that celebrated the peaceful beauty of the countryside), "William Street" is in keeping with modernism's mantra to "make it new."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Street is a real place in Syndey, Australia. Nowadays, it's part of the city's business district. But when Slessor wrote this poem in the 1930s, it was known as a place of poverty, crime, and various vices. It was also the center of Sydney's automobile trade; the "pulsing arrows" in line 2 are most likely part of the neon Dunlop Tyres sign looming over the road.

It's also worth remembering that Slessor wrote this poem towards the end of the Great Depression, the worst economic downturn the modern world had ever seen. The Depression began in the U.S. with the massive stock market crash of 1929 but quickly sent shockwaves around the world. Australia was hit particularly badly because its economy was heavily reliant on exports. And while the 1920s had been a period of post-war growth and prosperity for Sydney, the Depression brought this to a grinding halt. The dangling "ghosts' trousers" in this poem, implied to have been pawned by men who were out of work and in need of money, are a nod to the stark economic realities of the Depression.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Slessor's Life and Work — Read a biography of Slessor and some additional poems via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-slessor)
- More About the Poet — An in-depth account of Slessor's life, provided by the Australian Dictionary of Biography. (https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/slessor-kenneth-adolf-11712)
- In Slessor's Own Hand — A collection of Slessor's handwritten poetry drafts hosted by the National Library of Australia. (https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-223827772/view)
- A Slessor Documentary — Listen to an ABC radio documentary about Slessor's life and literary contributions. (https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/poetica/kenneth-slessor-part-one/4579892)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER KENNETH SLESSOR POEMS

- Beach Burial
- Sleep

HOW TO CITE

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