

# Transcending Modernity: Symbolism, Myth, and Desire in Hart Crane's *White Buildings*

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**Abstract:** A seminal piece of American modernist poetry, Hart Crane's *White Buildings* (1926) provides a visionary counterpoint to his contemporaries' disjointed sorrow. In order to create a poetic framework that seeks transcendence amid the disappointment of modernity, Crane uses complex symbolism, mythical references, and passionate longing, as this paper examines. In contrast to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which focusses on cultural degradation, Crane's writing aims for synthesis by utilising metaphor and synesthetic imagery to produce a language of exaltation and oneness. The article also explores Crane's musicality and linguistic innovation, showing how his poetic rhythms support his themes of spiritual desire and transcendence. This research places Crane as a poet who reimagines the possibilities of language by placing *White Buildings* inside the larger modernist environment, providing a poetic response to modernist isolation. In the end, this study argues that Crane's poetic vision which is based on the combination of myth, desire, and sound offers a singularly positive reaction to the uncertainties of the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Modernist poetry, Musicality in Poetry, desire in literature, Myth and Classical Allusion

In the context of literary modernism, Hart Crane's *White Buildings* (1926) holds a special and important position. His poetry is notable for its embracing of lyrical, emotional intensity, and a visionary aesthetic, even though it is heavily influenced by the avant-garde methods and issues of his modernist contemporaries. Crane approached modernism with a different impulse an yearning for transcendence, spiritual oneness, and the synthesis of the personal and the universal than poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who frequently concentrated on fragmentation, alienation, and the disillusionment of the contemporary world. Crane positions himself as a poet who aims to recover

meaning and mythological vision inside the fractured terrain of modernity via *White Buildings*, which both embraces and departs from important modernist concepts.

The study of fragmentation broken narratives, fractured subjectivities, and the alienation of people in a disenchanted world is one of the main principles of literary modernism. In this way, Crane's *White Buildings* has certain themes in common with other modernist pieces, especially when it comes to how it portrays a broken and sometimes chaotic world. John Pistelli criticize as, "Crane's symbols may have no traditional (or transpersonal) meaning at all... The poem does not convey; it presents; it is not topical, but expressive." Crane's poetry, however, aims to go above this fragmentation by combining myth, symbolism, and lyrical language use, which makes his approach to modernism unique.

Crane sees a more cohesive, yet complicated, image than Eliot, who, for instance, constructs a disjointed, disillusioned urban world in *The Waste Land*. His attempt to mend and transcend the rift he sees in the contemporary society is evident in *White Buildings*. By combining mythology, ancient references, and luscious lyrical imagery, Crane creates a more comprehensive understanding of the human condition. He highlights the concept of mobility and connection via desire in *Voyages*, where the disintegration of the ego turns into a tool for transcendence as opposed to hopelessness. Crane's modernism stands out as an effort to create harmony among the chaos of the contemporary world because of its emphasis on completeness and spiritual connection rather than alienation.

In his poetry, Crane reinterprets myth as a powerful force, although many modernist authors were doubtful of the importance of myth and tradition. Myth is used in *White Buildings* as an active and transformational tool that revitalises meaning in a contemporary setting rather than as a passive allusion. Classical tales are transformed into vehicles of creative and spiritual transcendence by Crane's use of myth in poems such as *Helen and Legend* and *For the Marriage of Faustus*. By doing this, he combines universal archetypes with human desire, presenting myth as a tool for attaining greater significance in the modern world rather than as a holdover from the past.

Crane's work stands out because it contrasts with other modernist poets like Pound and Eliot, who mostly employed myth as a reference or to establish intertextual links. Under Crane's direction, myth becomes a means of transcending both the particular and the universal, a tool for both. *White Buildings'* mythology serves as a unifying factor and a reaction to the fragmentation and isolation that characterise modernist art.

Crane's focus on sound and language's materiality places him in the more poetic branch of modernism. His preference for a visceral and intensely felt articulation over the more intellectual poetics of certain modernists reflects his longing for transcendence. The reader is drawn into a world where meaning is not only cerebral but visceral, experienced via the body as much as the mind, thanks to the melody of poetry like *Voyages* and *Repose of Rivers*. Poetry is elevated to an almost mystical experience by Crane's poetic style, which is consistent with his conception of modernity as something that is aspirational both artistically and spiritually.

Myth and classical references abound in Hart Crane's *White Buildings* (1926), elevating themes of love, desire, and spirituality above individualised or modern issues and placing them within a larger, nearly eternal poetic framework. Crane's use of myth is fundamental rather than ornamental, enabling him to bring modernist fragmentation and a visionary sense of oneness together.

In order to present love both sensual and spiritual as a transcending force, Crane frequently references

ancient myth. He retells the story of Helen of Troy, for instance, in *For the Marriage of Faustus* and *Helen*, making it a representation of the possibility of modernity's rebirth. Crane sees the past as a source of joyful inspiration, in contrast to T.S. Eliot, who sees it as a burden (*The Waste Land*). The poet's attempt to recover love and beauty in a fractured contemporary world is symbolised by Helen, a legendary figure of desire and destruction.

“And yet this quite young star now trails her frost,

Whispers white as rain upon the leaves,  
And then she comes, the sudden darkened

light

As though she were a flame of ice...”

In this context, Helen is not just a historical person but also a symbol of romanticised, eternal love that transcends time.

In an era when such subjects were socially forbidden, Crane's poetry is rife with homoerotic longing, and classical references offer a means of expressing desire. He uses nautical mythology to tie the lover's body to the sea, an ever-changing and immortal power similar to legendary waters, in his *Voyages* trilogy, which is frequently seen as an examination of same-sex love. Invoking characters like Odysseus or Poseidon, the poem subtly compares the quest for love to the historic naval adventures. Like the siren's voice luring sailors to an uncertain fate, love is portrayed as both dangerous and exuberant:

“Then, fisting the last flakes of bread,  
the waves hissed against the hunger,  
Snow became her bones.

The bottom of the sea is cruel.”

This phrase expresses a contemporary reality the combined ecstasy and danger of forbidden love while also echoing traditional cautions from Homeric stories.

Crane suggests a spiritual transcendence beyond physical experience in addition to exploring desire through story. In his lyrical vision, past and present, body and soul, desire and divinity are all united. He reinforces the concept that myth lives on in current symbols by seeing the Brooklyn Bridge as a contemporary mythical construction similar to the lost utopia of Atlantis in *Atlantis*, but not in *White Buildings*. *Repose of Rivers* also contains references to

traditional underworld stories, in which water, like the Greek mythological River Styx, represents both death and spiritual rebirth:

“And I would yield the glass of water,  
With half a rumor of some prayer.  
The thought of bread. The thought of stones.  
Not the buoyant air”

Here, the river's path echoes old tales of metamorphosis and rebirth, reflecting the soul's journey.

In *White Buildings* (1926), themes of love, desire, spirituality, and transcendence are explored via a wealth of symbolic imagery and mythical references. Crane reimagines classical and religious symbols to create a picture of ecstatic union, in contrast to many modernist poets who utilise myth to highlight division and misery. *White Buildings* connects the past and present with these components, bringing the majesty of myth and the fluidity of symbolic meaning into contemporary encounters.

By placing love and passion inside an archetypal framework, Crane regularly uses myth to raise homoerotic and intimate desire beyond social limitations. He reimagines the narrative of Helen of Troy in *For the Marriage of Faustus* and Helen, for example, making her a contemporary representation of beauty and ambition. Crane portrays Helen as a figure of rebirth, implying that mythology still has the ability to influence and uplift modern life, in contrast to T.S. Eliot's use of myth to highlight cultural deterioration in *The Waste Land*. He is able to present desire as more than fleeting or sexual through this mythic invocation; it becomes a force that can unite the temporal and the eternal.

The sea, a recurrent symbol in Crane's work, takes on mythological significance, evoking the journeys of Odysseus and invoking the god Poseidon. Similarly, the *Voyages* sequence, which is often read as a meditation on homoerotic love, uses maritime myth and classical allusions to transform physical passion into a spiritual and cosmic journey. Love is portrayed as both perilous and transcendent, much like the siren's call or the uncertain fate of ancient seafarers. The interplay between myth and the natural world in *Voyages* emphasises Crane's belief in the transformative and redemptive power of desire.

Crane's idea of poetry as a way to bring people together in a society that is otherwise divided is closely linked to his use of symbolism in *White Buildings*. Throughout the collection, water in particular serves as a crucial symbol, signifying both peril and cleansing. Crane connects the *River Styx* and other legendary streams that divide the world from the holy in *Repose of Rivers*, using river images to symbolise time and the cyclical aspect of life. This symbolic landscape implies that change and revelation result from movement, whether it is via time, desire, or lyrical expression.

Light and fire can function as repeating symbols, typically conveying religious or legendary meanings. In *Legend*, the first poetry in the book, light is both destructive and illuminating, symbolizing the quest for self-discovery. According to Crane's intricate symbolism, poetry is a kind of myth-making that gives an otherwise chaotic world purpose. His vision is not one of hopelessness but of promise myth and symbol serve as the framework for a poetic world where people might transcend contemporary alienation and progress towards a blissful unity with the universe.

Crane transforms desire into a transformational force that unites the physical and the spiritual, in contrast to many modernist writers who portray it as a place of loss or division. His poetry creates a picture in which desire is not only an earthly drive but a means of transcendence by combining homoerotic longing with myth, religious symbolism, and flowing imagery.

Desire is shown in *White Buildings* as a pathway to higher states of consciousness as well as a powerful physical sensation. One of the collection's most well-known scenes, *Voyages*, depicts love and desire in a marine environment where the sea serves as a metaphor for both sensual and spiritual immersion. Desire can be both overpowering and revelatory, much like the sea's fluctuating and unpredictable character. A shift away from strict conceptions of identity, love, and life itself is suggested by the imagery of waves, currents, and fluidity. In *Voyages*, the lovers undergo a kind of disintegration into something vast and infinite, in addition to their physical union; this experience is consistent with spiritual transcendence.

Desire is entwined with poetic inspiration and divine vision in *Legend*, the collection's opening poem. Crane depicts a nearly selfless desire in which the poet aspires to a blissful union with something bigger than himself. This theme runs throughout *White Buildings* because desire is frequently depicted as an existential hunger to unite with beauty, art, and the divine rather than as a simple yearning for another person.

The relationship between transcendence and desire is further supported by Crane's symbolic environment. His poetry usually uses fire and light to evoke both celestial revelation and sensual passion. He reworks the tale of Faust's quest for ultimate knowledge in *For the Marriage of Faustus* and Helen, connecting sexual and intellectual ambitions to a larger, mythic quest for fulfilment. Helen, a symbol of beauty and ambition, represents the ability of desire to drive a person towards something bright and timeless.

Water also serves as a recurrent theme, especially in *Voyages*, where it represents the malleability of love and the capacity for change. Crane views water as a place of transcendence and renewal, in contrast to modernist poets who frequently connect it with loss or decay. According to Crane, love offers the potential for mystical connection and an escape from the confines of the corporeal world rather than being destined to end in disillusionment.

*White Buildings* does not completely overlook the difficulties of balancing transcendence and desire, despite its exuberant images. The conflict between the material and the spiritual, between worldly love and the desire for something everlasting, is evident in many of Crane's writings. For instance, the difficulties of completely reconstructing the past becomes entwined with human memory and desire in *My Grandmother's Love Letters*. This implies that although desire strives for transcendence, it is equally plagued by feelings of incompleteness and loss.

Crane, however, defies the cynicism and isolation that characterise modernist writing. Crane portrays desire as a way to transcend the self, in contrast to authors like as T.S. Eliot, who see it as a pointless or corrupting force. The desire conveyed in *White Buildings* is not just sentimental or melancholy; rather,

it is a dynamic, transforming energy that aims to give emotion purpose.

Crane declines to place homoerotic love inside a tragic framework, in contrast to many of his modernist predecessors who frequently portray desire as tense or lonely. His poetry does not fall into simple mourning, even as it recognises the challenges of LGBT life in a heteronormative world. *White Buildings*, on the other hand, concentrates on the joyous, revelatory possibilities of desire and love. His conception of transcendence is based on the idea that desire may result in creative and spiritual fulfilment rather than destruction.

Rich musicality and complex rhythmic frameworks, which are essential in forming meaning and emotional resonance, are praised in *White Buildings* (1926). Crane adopted a lyrical that aimed to bring sound and sense together, in contrast to modernist poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who frequently used fragmentation and sarcasm. In addition to adding to the sensuous and exuberant aspects of his poetry, his use of musicality and rhythm supports his larger themes of transcendence, desire, and myth.

Crane regularly reinforces his mythological and metaphorical images with song. As though the poem itself were a ritualistic act, his allusions to Christian and ancient mythology are frequently accompanied with acoustic and rhythmic patterns that give them an incantatory character. Crane's musicality contributes to the meditative, almost sacred tone of *Legend*, the poem that opens *White Buildings*:

“As silent as a mirror is believed  
Realities plunge in silence by . . .”

The notion of poetic discovery is reinforced by the quiet, dreamy mood created by the delicate sibilance and extended vowels. Here, Crane's rhythm is more than just a structural component; it is essential to the poem's invocation of spiritual metamorphosis.

In *White Buildings*, musicality and rhythm are essential to Crane's meaning-making process rather than merely decorative elements. His use of sound produces an engrossing poetic experience in which the motions of transcendence, mythological revelation, and desire are enacted via rhythm. Crane's poetry transcends the logical limitations of modernism by

fusing auditory beauty with thematic depth, providing a lyrical, almost mystical alternative to its prevalent ways of expression. Crane creates poetry that is felt as well as read thanks to his distinctive use of rhythm and sound, which enables meaning to be revealed via the language's inherent melody.

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