

We Have Not Long to Love

Tennessee Williams

We have not long to love.

Light does not stay.

The tender things are those
we fold away.

Coarse fabrics are the ones
for common wear.

In silence I have watched you
comb your hair.

Intimate the silence,
dim and warm.

I could but did not, reach
to touch your arm.

I could, but do not, break
that which is still.

(Almost the faintest whisper would be shrill.)

So moments pass as though
they wished to stay.

We have not long to love.

A night. A day...

SUMMARY

- Williams' '*We Have Not Long To Love*' explores the knowledge that everything will come to an end. In a strange way, the very fact that things are transient is what makes them special. Williams relies on the fleeting nature of love, explaining the idea that love, at that moment, must be cherished. Indeed, there is only so much time living, so life and love must be enjoyed now.

STRUCTURE

'We Have Not Long To Love' by Tennessee Williams is split into 20 lines, formed as one continuous stanza. There is no rhyme scheme within the poem, the free-verse rhythm created by Williams being a reflection of the spontaneous and uncertain reality of life.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

- Williams' use of punctuation is incredibly important within the poem, with the use of [caesura](#) and [ellipsis](#) creating a slow and deliberate form. In doing this, Williams ensures that the poem lingers in places, [emphasizing](#) the idea that some moments feel longer than others, yet all will eventually fade away. Playing with time goes hand in hand with the manipulation of form, with Williams using this as a primary method of creating a soothing, yet fleeting narrative.
- Another technique that Williams employs in the writing of '*We Have Not Long To Love*' is the use of pronoun. Throughout the poem, the 'We' pronoun, which forms a sense of connection between the poet and his lover, is paramount, the pronoun being at the core of the narrative.

Analysis of *We Have Not Long To Love*

We have not long to love.

(...)

for common wear. (Line 1- 6)

The poem begins with the pronoun 'We', instantly alerting the reader that the poem will be discussing a relationship in which two people are closely connected through this pronoun. We are going to hear their story, the two lovers under one 'we' pronoun being the core focus of Williams' narrative.

Williams manipulates the [syntax](#) of the first line, 'not long to love' seemingly slightly out of place. Yet, in changing the typical form of English syntax, Williams places the poetic stress of the line upon 'love'. This is, after all, a love poem, and Williams, therefore, places emphasis on this idea.

Following this, the idea of positivity is insinuated through William's reference to "light", with 'light' and happiness often being closely related within poetry. Yet, this happiness does 'not stay', with Williams understanding that the happiness one finds in a relationship can never last forever. Indeed, depressingly, in the long term, all relationships will end in one form or another.

- Williams argues that the 'tender things', with the word 'tender' suggesting a soft sensitivity, furthering the suggestion of love within the poem, are those that they 'fold away'. He states that in a relationship, it is the private things that make the couple happy, those things that only they know, not public ideas and conceptions of them. Williams believes relationships are about privacy, with only the two people involved really knowing the workings. This view further relates to the context of the poem, with Williams being a homosexual man during a time where homophobia in society was the more common occurrence. Indeed, due to his sexuality, perhaps Williams felt the need to be private, keep things hidden where the world wouldn't prosecute him for simply loving.

In silence I have watched you

(...)

dim and warm. (Line 7- 10)

This suggestion of privacy is extended into a silent, slow [atmosphere](#) at this point within '*We Have Not Long To Love*'. The focus on 'silence', [repeated](#) twice in the space of these lines sets the atmosphere in which Williams is writing. This poem is not about bold and grandiose displays of love, it is about the quiet, simple moments.

Simple things like 'comb[ing] your hair' becoming moments of great happiness, nothing to distract the couple from enjoying each other's company. It is interesting to note that a slight insinuation of Williams' sexuality is implied here, if we examine the verbs used. Often when a woman 'combs' her hair, the verb 'brush' is used – brushing her hair. But here, the (arguably) more masculine verb 'comb' is used, subtitling insinuating the presence of a male lover in the poem.

The silence between the lovers is presented as 'dim and warm'. The use of 'dim' again relates to the idea that they do not want to create a great display of public affection, their love is quiet, 'dim' and subtle. Yet, although subtle, it is happy and loving, the beautiful atmosphere suggested by 'warm' compounding this sense of serenity.

**I could but did not, reach
(...)
that which is still.** (Line 11- 14)

Although happy, a sense of disconnection, with Williams understanding that time is short permeates the poem at this point. The use of caesura becomes somewhat overwhelming, 'I could, but do not, break', fracturing the sentence into grammatical isolation. Indeed, Williams is using the grammar and punctuation of this line to represent the eventual separation of the couple, the caesura posing as a physical representation of [metaphorical](#) romantic division.

Even the tense used at this point in the poem becomes far off and uncertain, the conditionality of 'I could' implying the possibility of them being together, yet the actual immobility of the poet. Williams focuses on the 'still', watching the scene almost as a third party as he sees his lover. He could reach out, but instead, he just absorbs the scene, taking in the 'silence' and the stillness and transforming it into a memory that he can keep. Although the relationship is transient, Williams knows he can keep moments like this in his memory, fighting against the fleeting nature of love through the captive power of the mind and memory.

**(Almost the faintest whisper
would be shrill.)**

(...)

We have not long to love.

A night. A day.... (Line 15- 20)

Williams again focuses on the subtle, quiet nature of '*We Have Not Long To Love*' being the primary focus of the poem. Even the 'faintest whisper' would still be too 'shrill' for this moment, disrupting the still silence. Williams even encloses these two lines in brackets, insinuating quietness and soft speech through selective punctuation. It's as if he is whispering about not wanting to whisper: Williams exaggerating the need for silence in this moment of perfection.

These 'moments' almost seem as if they 'wished to stay', Williams suggested that there is a longing in love, the slow melody of the scene representing their mutual desire for what they cannot have. The couple knows that they 'have not long to love', they must savor their moments together, even as they 'pass' altogether.

They stay like this, in their silent moment of connection as the world passes them by. Time is presented as rapidly moving within the final line of the poem, 'A night. A day' passing in four words. Love and their relationship cannot last forever, although they will try to slow the passing of time. The final focus of the poem is an ellipsis, the insinuation of a slow melody being represented through this final mark of punctuation. While Williams understands that he has 'not long to love', he wants to make it last as long as possible, savoring their subtle connection and these private tender moments above all else.

THANK YOU