

«[ОДНА МИНУТА ПРИЯТНО ГРОМКОЙ И БЕСПОРЯДОЧНОЙ МУЗЫКИ]»: КАК РАБОТАЮТ ЗВУК И МУЗЫКА В «ОДИНОКОЙ ЖЕНЕ ВИЛЛИ МАСТЕРСА» УИЛЬЯМА ГЭССА

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Аннотация

Мультимодальные нарративы все еще новый феномен в литературе, который только начинает изучаться. В настоящее время это исследовательское поле даже не имеет устоявшейся терминологии. В статье рассматривается использование звука и музыки в «Одинокой жене Вилли Мастерса» Уильяма Гэсса, а также предлагается терминология, которая может быть использована для исследования звуков с точки зрения их репрезентации в разных медиа. Основной исследовательский вопрос заключается в следующем: звуки в повести размывают границу между читателем и фикциональным миром или скорее устанавливают ее? Для ответа на него в статье анализируются как мультимодальные, так и немультимодальные звуки, чтобы составить полную картину их использования в тексте. В результате исследования был сделан вывод, что рассказчица, Бабс Мастерс, сама устанавливает границы фикционального мира, предотвращая полное слияние читателя с ней и с плоскостью нарратива.

“[One Minute of Pleasantly Loud and Raucous Music]”: How Sound and Music Function in William H. Gass’s “Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife”

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Keywords:
William H. Gass, Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife, multimodality, sound studies

Abstract

Multimodal narratives are still a new and poorly explored phenomenon in literature. Intermedial studies still do not even have a stable terminology. This article contains a research of sound and music usage in William H. Gass’s *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, providing the reader with the terminology which can be used for multimodal sounds’ exploration. The main research question of the paper is whether the sounds in the novella erase boundaries between the reader and the fictional world or, on the contrary, set them? To answer this question the article analyses both multimodal and non multimodal sounds so that we can get the whole picture of sound usage in the text. The research concludes that the narrator, Babs Masters, sets these boundaries in order to prevent the reader from their complete integration with the storyworld as well as with herself.

Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife (1968) by William H. Gass (1924 – 2017) is not an easily understandable text. You need to read it once just to learn how it should be *actually* read. Only at the second attempt one might find some clarity. I would refer to John Pier's work in order to provide the reader with a little more context of the novella. Pier points out that the names of Babs' husband and a co-author of *Human Sexual Response* (1956) (Pier 2015) are the same. In the book phases of a sexual engagement from the foreplay to the post-coital are described. The Gass' novella is divided into sections, and, according to Pier, each one symbolises one of those phases, although quite ambiguously (Pier 2015, 100).

Such an apparent obscurity may be a result not only of a stream of consciousness technique that dominates Gass's narrative, but also of the book structure with its abundance of multimodal elements. This hypothesis is somewhat ironic: most children's literature contains such multimodal elements as pictures and quotations from well-known songs to keep the reader entertained and make the process of reading easier. Why does this scheme fail to work in the same way for this text? The answer is deceptively simple. In most illustrated editions there is always a border between the fictional universe and the reader's reality whereas multimodality strives to erase it, making the reader, in Gass' own word, "fall into art" (Gass 2014, 58). *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* not only tries to emerge us into the storyworld as third-party witnesses but also encourages the reader to identify themselves with the narrator, Babs Masters. Willie Masters' wife, who as a child was molested by her own father, resents marriage and constantly talks about the relationship between women and men. This paper makes an attempt to figure out why this immersion into the storyworld is so difficult and what instruments Gass uses to either help or prevent it.

The novella has plenty of multimodal elements. There are many sound effects as well as iconic visual images and various typefaces. My emphasis is on Gass' usage of diegetic sounds that can be heard by characters within the storyworld. The aim of the research is to show how sonic phenomena promote an imaginary union of the reader's and the narrator's personalities. I will also try to answer some of David Herman's and Ruth Page's *Eighteen Questions for the Study of Narrative and Multimodality* (Herman, Page 2010). They provide researchers working in this field with some important starting points. There are two questions that are particularly interesting for this study: "What is the relationship between multimodality and the experience of the lifeworld?" and "How do narrative and non-narrative elements work together in multimodal texts of different kinds?" (Herman, Page 2010, 217-218). To answer those questions, I firstly need to clarify what I mean by multimodality in general, as well as what the difference

between multimodality and intermediality is and how the mode differs from medium. Werner Wolf defines medium as “a conventionally and culturally distinct mean of communication, specified not only by particular technical or institutional channels (or one channel) but, primarily, by the usage of one or more semiotic systems in the public transmission of contents that include, but are not restricted to, referential ‘messages’” (Wolf 2011, 2). This definition, however, does not satisfy our needs because it does not reflect a medium’s feature which distinguishes it from the mode. In their original forms mode and medium are identical; the difference here is in their integration into the narrative. Intermediality transforms non-verbal elements, such as pictures or music, into verbal ones to place them into the narrative. Multimodality does not transform these elements but integrates them directly into the narrative in their original form (Rudenko 2020, 47).

In its broadest sense, multimodality is mediated through different modes that are aimed at different organs of perception. In this case, the whole life is multimodal. Multimodality in literature, however, can be defined as an integration of non-verbal elements into the narrative in their original form without transforming them into verbal elements. Multimodal texts, such as *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, contain not only text but also pictures, sound imitations, maps, various typefaces, etc. which are aimed at different kinds of senses, although most of them are visual. Those visual signs, however, also involve different levels of perception. To analyse the usage of phonic signs in the novella I suggest dividing all audial pieces of information into three groups: multimodal sounds, diegetic music, and monomodal sounds being a part of the narrative and providing us with knowledge about the world of the novella.

As to *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, I define multimodal sounds as both diegetic and non-diegetic. Diegetic audio exists only in the fictive world, therefore it can be heard only by characters but not the reader (Delazari 2018, 221). Non-diegetic, on the contrary, are noises which exist outside of the storyworld and can be heard only by the reader (Delazari 2022, 66). These definitions seem to be mutually exclusive. So how can an audio piece be both diegetic and non-diegetic at the same time? Multimodal sounds can be perceived as noises produced by the heroine herself or as an imitation of sounds from the reality outside the storyworld. Multimodality of them is expressed through different fonts that encode auditory data through visual information. Changing fonts draw reader’s attention and make him/her start thinking of the way things should sound when Babs produces some kind of noise or how she would like it to sound, regardless if they are complete sentences or only onomatopoeic interjections. It leads to a change in the way the reader pronounces the sound-meaning word, so it is a step apart from the text. Therefore the sound can be heard both

by the heroine and the reader, which makes it diegetic and non-diegetic at the same time.

Non-multimodal sounds are common verbal references to auditory data in the text, for instance, “birds are singing”, “bees are buzzing”, etc. Basically they are intermedial sounds because non-verbal elements were transformed into verbal form in order to integrate them into the fictive world (Wolf 2011, 4). Such phrases also represent diegetic sounds that characters can hear, but this kind of audio stays within the storyworld. The reader perceives it through words, so it is different to sounds, because in the reader's mind the pronunciation of those verbal structures does not change. I do not use the term “intermedial” to define non-multimodal sounds only because the sound itself is not intermedial but multimodal and I do not want to cross this definite line between the definitions. Multimodality and intermediality are often mixed up in people’s minds, so I suggest using a different typology defining multimodality to avoid misunderstanding. Hereby, all the vital definitions have been given and explained. Therefore, we can start analysing fragments which contain multimodal sounds.

The first example of a sign containing auditory data I would like to examine appears on page nine of the cited edition of the novella:

“I suppose they call their twiggy little wonder by different names in different parts of the world. No, I’ve got it wrong—remembering. Her bosom is all air, the busty one’s bosom is, all air, and they pop when he

grabs her; first one pops and then the other— **pop**—and then *his* does—

pop—and he says: you’re an udder disappointment” (Gass 2014, 9).

The sound *pop* is an imitation of a sound that a balloon makes when it bursts, but the author refers to breasts instead. It can be considered a multimodal sound not only because it is a real sound imitation, but also because it is, according to the Wolf’s typology, a formal imitation (Wolf 2011, 5). To represent the font used in the novella I have chosen “Comic Sans MS”, bold and italics, 16pt. However, it differs in the book as another typeface is used there. The other distinctive feature is how the letters of the word *pop* are inclined: in my citation they are slanted while in the book the inclination is inverted (inclined to the left). Due to the typeface the word sounds louder, the font is bigger and bolder making the italic text sharp and sudden like a bursting balloon. It can be also compared with “Bouba/kiki effect” (Wikipedia, “Bouba/kiki effect”).

Firstly, it is important to see the context of this sound in the novella. As mentioned above, it is the noise of breasts popping as if they were balloons. It is interesting to compare that to an earlier fragment on page seven:

“Oh, we danced—divesting ourselves—and the comedians cracked jokes between their teeth like nuts. So every Peter has a peter, Charlie? Yeah, to make wee-wee, Joe. As it grows thick, they call it dick. Yeah, to make wow-wee, Charlie—**WOW-WEE!**” (Gass 2014, 7).

The most interesting words here are *wee-wee* and *wow-wee*, especially the latter. Gass makes a pun: *wee-wee* is a slang word for a penis less than 10 cm long, but when it “grows thick” it becomes a *wow-wee*. It is also Babs’ mockery of masculinity, as men are so obsessed with their penises that they give them nicknames and admire them. *Wee-wee* is also slang for urination, so there is a new level of the joke: the bigger the penis is, the grander the action is. It can be also considered as an opposition between ejaculating and urinating as two main penises’ functions. But what is more important here is the type of the font used for the last *wow-wee* which is the same as *pop* but not slanted. On page nine we can also see that not only breasts pop, but also “*his does*” (Gass 2014, 9), so there is the comparison between conventionally female and male body parts. If Babs is “an udder disappointment” (Gass 2014, 9) men in her eyes are “penis disappointments”. The last word *wow-wee* sounds differently to the reader as well because of the typeface. The bigger penis not only means the grander action, but also sounds louder. It seems that Babs wants the reader to feel its enormity, so she makes us read it louder.

However, we should examine the inclination of the words *wow-wee* and *pop* closer. Why does the word *pop* have it and the word *wow-wee* not? It can be explained with the superimposition of the physical qualities of the described objects onto the font. In Babs’ mind, penis is the sexual object she always imagines as hardened, hence there is no slant in the typeface. Breasts, on the other hand, are different in both the reader’s and Babs’ perception: they are softer than penises are. Moreover, we understand that Babs is not so young, her breasts are prone to ageing and started to sag. The inclination of the word *pop* can represent the physical state of it. In a sense, it functions as an embodied metaphor that is transmitted not only through the connection between font and physical qualities but also through the connection between sound and physical qualities. The typeface in this case represents both audial effects and physical qualities of human organs. However, despite these associations, such sounds do not refer to non-verbal phenomena, i.e. they are not popping balloons or

urinating noises literally. The auditory images are of words *pop* and *wow-wee* themselves and Babs pronounces them according to her internal monologue.

It is also important to look into the choice of the font for the word *pop*. It can be easily associated with pop-art paintings. Many of them contain similar inscriptions and often use this particular word. Some pieces of Gary Grayson depict small colourful explosive graphics with *pop* written in the centre of an image, for example, his work “POP art” (Gary Grayson, “POP Art”). Pop-art is also associated with Andy Warhol, the usage of bright colour images of real people, mostly women. Why does Gass allude to these paintings and designs? One possible answer is Babs’ attempt to turn her life into art that corresponds with the main purpose of the novella: to turn a book into a woman. We can observe a double transformation, which represents the relationship between the author and his character. While the character strives to become an art object through this association with pop-art and to turn her life into a play, the author forbids her to do so and wants the heroine to stay a human. Considering the colour, another observation can be made. While the novella contains only black and white images, pop-art is known for its bright contrasting shades. This opposition can illustrate the hidden desire of Babs. The black and white tones of the text represent her current life and perception of the world she lives in, but the saturation of colours in pop-art depicts the world she wants to live in.

This association helps to understand the connection between narrative and the real world. “The signs that people use are created within their cultures” (Shanahan 2012, 266), so, by using this font, the author relies on our experience of art perception. Gass does not mention Babs’ desire explicitly, but he uses a well-known image instead. It can provide the reader with multiple interpretations which construct new images of Babs Masters for every reader as if she was a real person.

Returning to the fragment on page seven we should emphasise the usage of multimodality to illustrate the change of volume. The last *wow-wee* is written in large bold font as an imitation of a louder sound. Another example we can find on page eight: “Screw—they say, **screw**—what an idea!” (Gass 2014, 8). When reading the second *screw* we might mentally pronounce it louder because of a bold font. Here the sound performs an orientation function helping the reader to understand when the volume increases (Porto 2016, 36).

Later in the novella Babs as a writer creates a brief comic play about Ivan, his wife Olga and their relationship. The story is extremely short and contains numerous comments, which start to displace the play’s text by the end. Babs’ narrative is similar to a stream of consciousness (like

her monologue) and does not have a plot. The play includes music: “[*One Minute of Pleasantly Loud and Raucous Music*]” (Gass 2014, 22). I tried to choose the best matching font for this citation. To the right of the inscription the reader can see a treble clef, two sharps and six notes. However, due to the lack of a music stave no musician will be able to play this melody. The description of this audial fragment is also contradictory: loud sounds could be perceived as pleasant, but raucous could not. To consider music pleasant there should be harmony and a definite melody. “Raucous” is usually associated with unpleasant sounds, noises that we want to stop as soon as possible. Thus, the reader cannot play this melody using notes and cannot imagine a familiar melody that could match the description. A Google search, for example, brings no results. When characters of the play hear melody, and we should hear it as well, there is... nothing. Just silence.

Such a musical fragment can be classified as non-diegetic, as the characters have an access to it, but the reader cannot even imagine what it sounds like. It can exist only in the storyworld, therefore no existing tune could be a basis of this fragment. We just know that there is such a piece.

But what is the context of this music? It is a part of Ivan’s long monologue, which could also be described as raucous, because it has no sense and no complete thought:

“Ivan. <...> How should I know? In my spot, who would? Nobody, I’ll bet you on it. Nobody would know. Her [*he points behind him*—she wouldn’t. She’s walked over my heart a hundred times, like a paving stone, why should she remember every place she’s put her foot? [*shivers*] Christ, everyone running around naked and there’s never any heat in the joint*****” (Gass 2014, 22).

Then this monologue is interrupted by music the reader cannot hear and even imagine. And then there is another interruption:

“Olga. [*smashes other fist through paper bringing music to abrupt end, grasps her own bun roughly, withdraws it through the shatter******]” (Gass 2014, 23).

The reader can conceptualise these episodes as an unclear stream of consciousness and not even try to understand what the characters are talking about. But it is interesting that Olga stops the melody by smashing her fist through the paper rather than piano keys, for example. There is no indicated source of the music in the fragment, so in a sense it can be called an auditum (in case the reader continues to keep in mind that this is not

a real sound) – a sound that is perceived apart from its source and is the result of all possible types of listening (Chion 2021, 246). Do characters even hear this music themselves? Maybe Ivan does because it is a part of his monologue. Babs should also know what kind of music she is writing about. But neither Olga nor the reader have any idea about what it sounds like. Multimodality here, as I have mentioned in the introduction, is driven by the reader's own mind, producing sounds in the reader's own head, so there is no need for a special music playback.

This fragment is a slightly controversial one in terms of classification. At first sight it can be perceived as the sound with an attentional function, which, according to Dolores Porto, is aimed at attracting the reader's sight (Porto 2016, 39). Sounds with this function often use cultural identification, for example, well-known songs and melodies. However, as the reader fails to recognise the sound, it becomes clear that there is a border between the narrator and the reader. Although throughout the whole novella Gass is eager to unite us with the heroine, we can see now that a complete unity cannot be achieved. We can easily do it with Babs as a personality, as she is fully open to the reader. But not with Babs as a writer. During her play she fades into the background and does not give us complete information about what is going on in her mind. Considering this musical fragment it is also possible to make a conclusion that Babs associates herself more with Ivan than with Olga. The relationship between Babs and Ivan is similar to the one between Gass and Babs, so it can be viewed as a kind of connection between an artist and a character. The evidence can be found in the beginning of the play when Ivan tries either to remember or to choose the name of his wife. Babs talks much about names in the novella: men that are giving names to their penises, the wish to choose a new name for herself. By giving Ivan the right to choose a name she refers to herself. Therefore, the inclusion of music in this play just proves the unity of Babs' and Ivan's perception.

When exploring non-multimodal sounds we should ask the question: how does the world of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* sound? If we try to find an answer, we would make an unexpected discovery: it is almost silent. No singing birds, no noise of the streets, no dripping of raindrops, etc. Of course, sound is not absent in the text, but what is more important, the majority of it comes from people.

The novella begins with a narration on behalf of Babs Masters, and the first sounds appear only on the second page. However, on this page the reader can find a trick: there is a focalization switch, which is expressed by the changing fonts. The standard typeface is replaced by a smaller and a bolder one. The structure of the novella implies switching from one font to another making the reader compare those small fragments written in

different ways and assemble them into a unified image. The main distinctive feature of the “smaller and bolder” part is a switch of the narrator. In the fragments with a standard font there is a first person narration and it is fully connected with Babs’ perception. She continues to use such words as *my*, which keep us close to her, but the reader sees not only *I* but also *we*. In the latter case we associate this new perception not only with Babs, but with all women whose perspective she pretends to represent. Sounds appear here for the first time in the novella. They are, still, not connected with the outside world (*outside* here means *natural, non-human*), as they are human noises, such as laughing and moaning. Michel Chion claims that the human ear can perceive less than 95% of all audial information, and the remaining 5% only vaguely reflect the reality we live in (Chion 2021, 144). It means that we can never hear all the sounds in this world. However, Babs seems to be not so interested in the other 5%. Although She does not completely ignore them, her attention is concentrated more on human sounds, almost ignoring *natural* noises. The question is whether she does this on purpose. Keeping it in mind we can put forward a theory that, in the case of audial information, Babs’ ignorance of the outside world indicates that she is separated or is willing to be separated from it and not perceive its sounds.

There are two types of audio she is able to perceive: human sounds I have mentioned and the music. As to the music there are no descriptions of melodies or songs’ and compositions’ titles. All the information Gass gives to the reader is just the fact that the tunes exist in the novella. For example, on page five where Babs describes what surrounds her she says that “the radio has come unplugged” (Gass 2014, 5). Those words imply that although we cannot hear the music on the radio now we become ready to hear it later, therefore our perception is tuned to perceive sounds of it at some point later. Throughout the whole novella *waltzing* is mentioned suggesting that there is actually some music playing, though Babs does not say anything about it. Another way we can imagine the scene is that people are waltzing in silence, just playing the music in their heads. Looking for the sound source through allusions to the radio or waltz, we, in fact, break the rule of reducing listening (Chion 2021, 290) by perceiving the sound not in a vacuum, but in connection with its origin. The novella itself seems to be striving to return to the correct reduced listening, breaking the connection between the potential source of sound and the sound itself, because, in fact, the appearance, for example, of a radio in a room does not mean that it must necessarily be turned on and make a sound.

It seems like Babs’ perception is restricted by her own mind: she is so concerned with her thoughts that she ignores almost everything around her, therefore, there is no detailed description of the surroundings. The

same pattern goes with the sounds. Unconsciously or on purpose, she limits her perception by noticing only human noises and music. **Focusing on different sounds while reading this novella helps the reader to notice that Babs leaves the reality for the world of her inner experiences and creations: through her plays she writes out a soundscape alternative to the surrounding.**

Another interesting trait of Babs is her love for humming melodies. The reader sees it, for example, on page twenty one: **“hollah, hollah, hollah—in voices deep as tubas. <...> through a caress—hai! hai!—the words of rude songs and moves of my dances <...>”** (Gass 2014, 21). Here the reader can notice an inclusion of the music as well as the border between the reader and the narrator. We know there are some songs, but we cannot identify them, because the title, notes or, at least, more detailed description is absent. Another example is on page thirteen: “Nevertheless he regains his breakfast calmly and peeks la-de-da in the bun” (Gass 2014, 13). This fragment is different, because here Babs uses this melody as a euphemism. This particular sound imitation looks like an attempt to make up for the lack of music in the heroine's life. As I mentioned earlier, she seems to separate herself from the outside world in terms of sounds, so she needs to create new ones to fill this gap.

Summarising the whole analysis of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife's* soundscape, we can see some unexpected results. The main aim of multimodality is to erase boundaries between the reader and the narrative. The sound in this particular novella, however, does the opposite and sets those boundaries. The heroine often mentions music fragments but does not give the reader enough information to understand what kind of music she is talking about. Instead of getting closer to Babs the reader keeps distance. Another evidence of this is the absence of sounds in the novella's world. The detailed description of the narrative's audial image could make us feel like we were in the heroine's position. However, she seems unwilling to get closer to the reader, which leads to the suggestion that Babs is not fully honest with us. She creates a new image of herself through her writing, she pronounces words, sings, dances and imitates sounds to distract the reader from the fact that this personality of hers exists only in a vacuum, not in the real world (here: the fictive one). Her world is almost silent, therefore, she needs to make sounds by herself to fill that void, make the reality she exists in more alive. But all of those sounds exist only in her mind, so she can neither properly describe them nor name songs or compositions. In this task multimodality is on Babs' side helping her in conveying to the reader some changes in volume, for example, through different fonts.

In conclusion I would like to pay attention to the controversial results of the research. The novella breaks the reader's expectations of getting closer to the narrator. The expectations in question are created by multimodality itself, as all the pictures of naked Babs and the changes in fonts imitating her voice make us expect the full honesty from her. But such a multimodality misleads us, distancing the reader from the heroine, keeping Babs and the reader in two separate worlds. Gass's general aesthetics is anti-realist, and in this novella he uses Babs' image to create a new illusion of reality, however, making it inaccessible. So the way her character is represented through the sound has nothing to do with the real world. For example, if Babs was made from rubber, like a balloon, her breasts would be poppable, however how would she be able to write a play? **Such an image represents her moving in two directions: she gets closer to the reader and at the same time she escapes. It proves my hypothesis that Babs tries to protect herself from the merge with the reader and those examples illustrate that the problem of perception comes not from the reader but from the text.** Trying to answer the questions put at the beginning of the article we notice that multimodal sound elements interact with the real world, especially with the reader directly, generating thought processes and chain associations, which are caused by both narrative and non-narrative elements. However, the research shows that it is not the reader that opposes the process of merging but the narrative itself. It is illustrated by those examples of the sound usage where all the sounds and the music stay diegetic and remain within the narrative not interacting with the real world.

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