

William Carlos Williams



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Brief Biography of William Carlos Williams

from The Academy of American Poets

In 1883, William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. He began writing poetry while a student at Horace Mann High School, at which time he made the decision to become both a writer and a doctor. He received his MD from the University of Pennsylvania, where he met and befriended Ezra Pound.

Pound became a great influence on his writing, and in 1913 arranged for the London publication of Williams's second collection, *The Tempers*. Returning to Rutherford, where he sustained his medical practice throughout his life, Williams began publishing in small magazines and embarked on a prolific career as a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright.

Following Pound, he was one of the principal poets of the Imagist movement, though as time went on, he began to increasingly disagree with the values put forth in the work of Pound and especially Eliot, who he felt were too attached to European culture and traditions. Continuing to experiment with new techniques of meter and lineation, Williams sought to invent an entirely fresh—and singularly American—poetic, whose subject matter was centered on the everyday circumstances of life and the lives of common people.

His influence as a poet spread slowly during the twenties and thirties, overshadowed, he felt, by the immense popularity of Eliot's "The Waste Land"; however, his work received increasing attention in the 1950s and 1960s as younger poets, including Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, were impressed by the accessibility of his language and his openness as a mentor. His major works include *Kora in Hell* (1920), *Spring and All* (1923), *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), the five-volume epic *Paterson* (1963, 1992), and *Imaginations* (1970).

Williams's health began to decline after a heart attack in 1948 and a series of strokes, but he continued writing up until his death in New Jersey in 1963.



Bruegel, Pieter. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

by William Carlos Williams

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

On "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

Audrey T. Rodgers

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" touches upon the Greek myth of the tragedy of Icarus. As we know, according to Ovid and Appolodorus, Icarus, son of Daedalus, took flight from imprisonment wearing the fragile wings his father had fashioned for him. Heedless of his father's warning to keep a middle course over the sea and avoid closeness with the sun, the soaring boy exultantly flew too close to the burning sun, which melted his wings so that Icarus hurtled to the sea and death. The death of Icarus, the poet tells us "According to Brueghel," took place in spring when the year was emerging in all its pageantry. The irony of the death of Icarus, who has always been an emblem for the poet's upward flight that ends in tragedy, is that his death goes unnoticed in the spring—a mere splash in the sea. The fear of all poets ~ that their passing will go "quite unnoticed" ~ is an old and pervasive theme. That Williams reiterates the theme is significant in the life of a poet who always felt the world had never fully recognized his accomplishments.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

Reflection and Response

1. What does this poem say about the pursuit of excellence?

... how do you know? Use specific examples from the poem to substantiate your answer.

2. The poem clearly lacks punctuation conventions, but is evidently strong with other conventions. Address Williams's approach to different convention types; why do you think Williams decided to write this poem in this way?

... what makes you so sure of this?

3. In what ways does the language in Williams's poem capture the painting by Brueghel? Find a number of different examples.

4. If Williams had written a different poem about Brueghel's painting that did not focus on Icarus, what might he have focused on and why?

... can you be more specific?

5. In terms of the quality of the poem, what are your opinions? Explain your regard for the aesthetics, themes, or other elements that express your honest assessment of the poem. Avoid affective fallacies.

The Descent

by William Carlos Williams

The descent beckons	I
as the ascent beckoned.	
Memory is a kind	
of accomplishment,	
a sort of renewal	5
even	
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places	
inhabited by hordes	
heretofore unrealized,	
of new kinds—	10
since their movements	
are toward new objectives	
(even though formerly they were abandoned).	
 No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since	
the world it opens is always a place	15
formerly	
unsuspected. A	
world lost,	
a world unsuspected,	
beckons to new places	20
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory	
of whiteness .	
 With evening, love wakens	
though its shadows	
which are alive by reason	25
of the sun shining—	
grow sleepy now and drop away	
from desire .	
 Love without shadows stirs now	
beginning to awaken	30
as night	
advances.	
 The descent	
made up of despairs	

and without accomplishment
realizes a new awakening:
which is a reversal
of despair.

35

For what we cannot accomplish, what
is denied to love,
what we have lost in the anticipation—
a descent follows,
endless and indestructible .

40

On "The Descent"

Carl Rapp

"The descent beckons / as the ascent beckoned.", says Williams at the beginning of his final phase, and he means by this a descent into memory, a descent into his own inner depths, wherein he finds compensation for the increasingly disturbing poverty of that which is revealed by the senses. Like Wordsworth at the Simplon Pass, Williams reaches a point at which the external world no longer seems to provide an adequate correlative for his desires and expectations. His only recourse is to turn inward, as Wordsworth does, in search of satisfactions which the outward world apparently denies. The reasons for this change of direction are, in Williams' case, fairly obvious: the heart attack in 1948, the death of his mother in 1949, and, most spectacularly, the series of crippling strokes in 1951 and 1952 that almost completely knocked him out, paralyzing his right arm and seriously impairing his speech and eyesight. At this most critical time in his life, when the light of sense was almost permanently extinguished, he was forced to acknowledge "what we cannot accomplish, what // is denied to love, / what we have lost in the anticipation." Up to this point, his lordship over the facts had never been seriously threatened; he had simply appropriated whatever he wanted, bending it to his will like a god. Now the whole world seemed to be threatened with dissolution. The facts were becoming recalcitrant, inimical. They were "the sorry facts," betokening "ruin for myself / and all that I hold / dear," and the question was, what to do about it, how to respond. It was a genuine crisis for Williams' idealism, but he met it characteristically and, as it turned out, successfully by using the facts as an impetus to his own thinking. The drama of consciousness—the oyster's fretting over the grain of sand—remained just as important as it had been, only now it began to appear as a topic worthy of contemplation in its own right. Indeed, Williams began to display it more directly in his poetry than ever before, as he came to realize that the process of constructing answers to the problems posed by death and dissolution was itself the answer he was seeking.

"The Descent" establishes a pattern often repeated in Williams' later poetry; Williams takes the facts as he finds them and interprets them in such a way as to give them a new, more beneficent character. The facts in themselves are neither disguised nor altered, but Williams makes it possible for us to see them in a new way and to give them new names. As a result, the problems they pose appear to have been dissolved, while Williams himself appears to have been elevated to a life of the spirit in which he is inwardly more secure than ever before. . . .

In "The Descent" Williams finds a similar way of looking at defeat and loss that enables him to see those negative experiences as positive ones with implications not yet "realized." For example, it occurs to him, as it also occurred to Wordsworth in an analogous predicament, that the compensation for being dispossessed of the world of the scenes is to be repossessed of it as it exists in the mind, stored in memory...

When the "perishable signs" are destroyed, when the forms of things are shattered (including the forms of our own bodies), then "the permanent shines out for the first time clearly" and "we see at last that love is not anything mortal." In "The Descent," the truth of this prophetic observation is simultaneously revealed and reasserted. . . .

The Descent

Reflection and Response

1. Analyze Williams's use of the word "descent;" is this word being used to convey something sinister? What does the word connote in this poem?

... how do you know?

2. What is the target audience for this piece?

... what language from the poem informs you that it is indeed target to this audience?

3. In lines 21 and 22, what is Williams's saying about memory? How does this concept of memory work in other passages from the poem? Is his concept of memory consistent throughout the entire piece?

4. According to your understanding of this poem, what is Williams's main message to his readers about memory as we get older?

... how do you know?

5. Read the final stanza of the poem (lines 33-43). In your opinion, is this an effective ending?

Do you agree with the redemption of "the descent?" Why or why not? Address Williams's use of antithesis; in what ways does this technique affect the text, specifically when considering the word "reversal" (line 37)?

The Red Wheelbarrow

by William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Explanation of “The Red Wheelbarrow”

Lines 1-2

The opening lines set the tone for the rest of the poem. Since the poem is composed of one sentence broken up at various intervals, it is truthful to say that “so much depends upon” each line of the poem. This is so because the form of the poem is also its meaning. This may seem confusing, but by the end of the poem the image of the wheelbarrow is seen as the actual poem, as in a painting when one sees an image of an apple, the apple represents an actual object in reality, but since it is part of a painting the apple also becomes the actual piece of art. These lines are also important because they introduce the idea that “so much depends upon” the wheelbarrow.

Lines 3-4

Here the image of the wheelbarrow is introduced starkly. The vivid word “red” lights up the scene. Notice that the monosyllable words in line 3 elongates the line, putting an unusual pause between the word “wheel” and “barrow.” This has the effect of breaking the image down to its most basic parts. The reader feels as though he or she were scrutinizing each part of the scene. Using the sentence as a painter uses line and color, Williams breaks up the words in order to see the object more closely.

Lines 5-6

Again, the monosyllable words elongate the lines with the help of the literary device assonance. Here the word “glazed” evokes another painterly image. Just as the reader is beginning to notice the wheelbarrow through a closer perspective, the rain transforms it as well, giving it a newer, fresher look. This new vision of the image is what Williams is aiming for.

Lines 7-8

The last lines offer up the final brushstroke to this “still life” poem. Another color, “white” is used to contrast the earlier “red,” and the unusual view of the ordinary wheelbarrow is complete. Williams, in dissecting the image of the wheelbarrow, has also transformed the common definition of a poem. With careful word choice, attention to language, and unusual stanza breaks Williams has turned an ordinary sentence into poetry.

On "The Red Wheelbarrow"

Hugh Kenner

Not what the poets *says*, insisted Williams; what he *makes*; and if ever we seem to catch him *saying* ("So much depends upon. . ."), well, he has cunningly not said *what* depends. He has levered that red wheelbarrow into a special zone of attention by sheer torque of insistence.

Attention first encounters the word "upon," sitting all alone as though to remind us that "depends upon," come to think of it, is a rather queer phrase. Instead of tracing, as usage normally does, the contour of a forgotten Latin root, "depends upon" ignores the etymology of "depend" (*de* + *pendere* = to hang from). In the substantial world "upon" goes nicely with "wheelbarrow": *so much*, as it were, *piled upon*. In the idiomatic world, inexplicably, "upon" goes with "depends." In the poem, since we're paying unaccustomed attention, these two worlds are sutured, and "depends" lends its physical force, an incumbency as though felt by the muscles, to what must be a psychic depending. . . .

[[A]]fter "upon," there's what looks like a stanza break. What are these stanzas? Small change symmetrically counted, always three words and then one word, the one word, moreover, always of two syllables, but the three-word line having four syllables the first time and the last, but only three syllables on its two middle occurrences. These are stanzas you can't quite *hear*, especially as one very simple sentence runs through all four of them. They are stanzas to see, and the sight of them, as so often in Williams, inflects the speaking voice, the listening ear, with obligations difficult to specify. "Upon," "barrow," "water," "chickens," these words we punctuate with as it were a contraction of the shoulders, by way of doing the stanzas' presence some justice. And as we give "barrow" and "water" the emphasis their isolation requests, two other words, "wheel" and "rain," isolate likewise. . . .

"Wheelbarrow" and "rainwater," dissociated into their molecules, seem nearly kennings: not adjective plus noun but yoked nouns, as though new-linked. And "red" goes with "white," in a simple bright scheme, and "chickens" with "barrow" for an ideogram of the barnyard, comporting with the simplicities of rain; and the rain glazes a painted surface but (we are left to imagine) does not glaze the chickens, merely soaks them if they are chickens enough to stand in it. (And yet they need it, and may not be wise enough to know how much depends, for them, on the rain.) So much depends on all that pastoral order: food, and the opportunity to touch actualities (while trundling a wheelbarrow), and the Sabine diastole to counter the urban systole.

Are these reflections penumbral to the poem? Probably. Probably even external to it. This poem tends to ignore what it doesn't state. But let them serve to remind us that a farmer would know every one of the words in this little poem, but would be incapable of framing the poem, or even uttering its sentence. We need to be at a picturesque distance from such elements to think of how much depends (for us) on them.

"Mobile-like arrangement," said Wallace Stevens. Yes. The lines, the words, dangle in equidependency, attracting the attention, isolating it, so that the sentence in which they are arrayed comes to seem like a suspension system. This was one thing Williams meant by "making," not "saying." Yet

you do say, you do go through the motions of saying. But art lifts the saying out of the zone of things said. For try an experiment. Try to imagine an occasion for this sentence to be said:

So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens.

Try it over, in any voice you like: it is impossible. It could only be the gush of an arty female on a tour of Farmer Brown's barnyard. And to go on with the dialogue? To whom might the sentence be spoken, for what purpose? Why, to elicit agreement, and a silent compliment for the speaker's "sensitivity." Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you heard someone say it you'd wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a *thing made*, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether, a zone remote from the world of sayers and sayings.

That zone is what Williams in the 1920's started calling "the Imagination."

The Red Wheelbarrow

Reflection and Response

1. What purpose does this text serve?

... for whom is this purpose intended?

2. Address the aesthetics of this poem by citing particular words and phrases.

... is the language effective or ineffective in your opinion? Why?

3. Is this poem effective within a particular time period, or is it timeless?

4. According to “Explanation of ‘The Red Wheelbarrow,’” which lines are most important in the development of Williams’s image.

... can you justify your answer so as to persuade another reader’s differing opinion?

5. Do you fall in line with what Williams identifies as “the Imagination” when you read Hugh Kenner’s piece about “The Red Wheelbarrow?” Explain your own relationship with Williams’s “Imagination” by using the poem.