

## **The Idea of Death in William Carlos Williams: A Study in Selected Short Poems**

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### **1- i Abstract**

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is a modern American poet, novelist, critic, painter and pediatrician, who established his literary career with the advent of the twentieth century surveying various fields of life with a doctor's eye. He provides the English literature with prolific contributions that bear witness of his impressive ability and comprehensive realization of life as an artist.

Williams reflects numerous salient traits in his works especially in poetry, but his primary concern is the application of naïve good sense and native intelligence to devise the poetic structure that would formalize experiences without deforming them. He says: "let the beat of speech determine the measure; to rinse the language of ornament and encrustation to scrupulously selective but to allow for accident and impingement." <sup>1</sup>

Williams, who had been a derivative poet up to at least the age of thirty, became within few years a "remarkably original

one. The reason for his striking transformation has never been adequately discussed. It is generally assumed that the change was due to the progressive maturation of Williams' poetic skills."<sup>2</sup>

Williams affirms the function of art, and of poetry in particular, a new kind of precision, equivalent to scientific method but directed towards objectivising experience. To do this the" writer according to Mike Weaver, had to become his own reader, a functioning perceiver observing himself in action."<sup>3</sup> Williams stated in his letter to John C. Thirwall the new tradition that he had devised to write his poems and how he had become aware of a basic change that affects the way of writing them.

*It is part of our present situation in the world that when we perceive an alternative to our action which enlarges the fields which they occupy, we feel inevitably impelled to give them the head to go where they are called... There are leads which points the way to the approaching changes, undoubtedly unwelcome that have been latent for centuries. The tendency of the race is to resist change violently.<sup>4</sup>*

Williams' poems 'the Dead Baby' , 'Death', 'the Shadow', 'Winter Trees', 'To Waken An Old Lady' and 'the Barber of Death' reveal an outstanding orientation directed by the poet to the concept of death and all its incurring aspects as it is examined

by an experienced American doctor who surveyed man from birth to death. The research aims at proving this orientation and displaying the poet's points of view whether it is positive or negative and his concept of regeneration and renewal.

### 1-ii William Carlos Williams' Realization of Death

William approached death through various aspects of life, focusing on the psychological influence that it casts over the humans with all their associations with environmental realities whether of animals or plants. Hence the poet stated in his poem 'Shadow' a part of his notion through the use of the countering force of life to highlight the targeted aspect of death. Spring is invited to show the opposite force of death. The poet describes the grave in soft and delicate way since it is an elementary reality of earth and its vital regeneration.

*Soft as the bed in the earth  
where a stone has lain-  
so soft so smooth and so cool  
spring does me in  
with their arms and her hands.<sup>5</sup>*

Even the grave is treated and personified like a living creature by Williams, so it can breathe and reflect its living aspect, though; it is an incarnation of death and barrenness.

*Rich as the smell  
of new earth on a stone  
that has lain breathing  
the damp through its pores  
Spring close me in  
with her blossomy hair  
brings dark to my eyes.*

**The Collected Poems, (CP), p. 50.**

So, Williams sustains optimistic vision of life and death even in moments when crisis befalls. In his poem 'the Dead Baby' he unleashes his passions as they are reflected by the family aspect.

*Sweep the house  
under the feet of the curious  
holiday seeker-  
sweep under the table and the bed  
the baby is dead-  
the mother's eyes where she sits  
by the window, unconsoled-  
have purple bags under them the father-  
tall well spoken, pitiful  
is the abler of these two-  
sweep the house clean  
her is one who has gone up  
(though problematically)*

*To heaven blindly  
By force of the facts-  
A clean sweep is one way of expressing it-  
Hurry up! Any minute  
They will be bringing it  
from the hospital-  
a white model of our lives  
a curiosity-  
surrounded by fresh flowers*

(CP), p. 268.

The family receives their dead baby in a sort of celebration covered with fresh flowers like a bridegroom to his wedding day, but the baby is delivered to heaven- blindly- by force of facts that are beyond explanation. The foregoing statement is so emphatic as to be almost ambiguous as if "Williams subconscious were working parenthetical sabotage. Yet in his conscious mind at least William could not have been fiercely independent."<sup>6</sup>

Williams' poem 'the Barber of Death' is a dramatic monologue narrated by the barber who witnesses various sectors of people every day of his career. His life is fully charged with profound experiences about death stories. So, the poet refers to the idea of man's continuous death every night as if he had read John Donne's Holy Sonnet no. 10 when he compares Death with a short sleep: "From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow."<sup>7</sup>  
Unyielding to death, Williams affirms the concept of regeneration to create a peculiar myth of his own creation.

*Of death  
the barber  
the barber  
talked to me  
cutting my  
life with  
sleep to trim  
my hair –  
It is just  
a moment  
he said, we die  
every night  
And of  
the newest ways  
to grow*

(CP), p. 212-13.

Williams in his poem 'Winter Trees' focuses on an important reality of life which is the continuation of living with death, so death becomes a way to pursue life and have its splendid luxuries. So, the tree provides man with an immortal lesson which directs him to the natural course of life despite all

the complicated details of its process. The poet describes the tree as wise because it keeps the buds and protects them from the harsh weather of winter to blossom next spring.

*All the complicated details  
of attiring and  
the disattiring are completed  
A liquid moon  
moves gently among  
the long branches  
Thus having prepared their buds  
against sure winter  
the wise trees  
stand sleeping in the cold.<sup>8</sup>*

For Williams, mental activity in most people is conducted predominately at the level of the ordinary consciousness or the ego. The distinctive feature of such life is its tendency towards a rigid conservatism, a fear of new experience and a need to operate safely within established categories. Thus, he says:

*Ordinary consciousness is governed by habitual and conventional associations...which is the 'true value'- and thus constitutes a kind of veil cutting the individual off from otherness and from unique selfhood. Locked within a system, cut off from fresh experience by the desire for security, the ordinary man will emotionally and sensually starved – walking outside of his own body.<sup>9</sup>*

Ironically, then, the person who seeks security in this way uproots himself from reality and becomes a perpetual drifter because he is impoverished, and his activity will be incessant, but because he is dissociated from the source of life, his restless activity will be futile. However, Williams believes that the American individual who is confused with the idea of regeneration and renewal because he is abstracted from immediate experience from the new world, as he states: "the ordinary American is man whose swift – moving commitment to material ends as abstracted him from immediate experience – from the new world, his fear of the new, thwarting the creative process of renewal, self destructive."<sup>10</sup>

So man, according to Williams, has to act on deeper level of personality, which is the buried self and the rebellious force of the physical nature. The poet's task is to unleash the primitive buried power and hear every portion of the personality speaking, "the middle brain, the nerves, the glands the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking. The ego melts, the body speaks and we renew, momentarily at least our participation in the rhythmic ebb and flow of the mysterious life process."<sup>11</sup> William readily agrees on the need to attend to artistic form. As early as



1919 he "had emphasized 'immaculate craft' in poetry, distillation of what he had learned from the precise stylist Pound."<sup>12</sup>

Williams has advocated a new tradition in his writing, but it is not far from the past realization of life in a modern view as T.S. Eliot has stated in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' tradition " can not be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty – fifth year."<sup>13</sup> So, he aims at making compromise between his time and place, as Sankey states "Williams's subject is the poet's attempt to come to term with the experience of his own time and place."<sup>14</sup>

Williams dedicates himself for people through different fields of life, that he served them as a doctor who prescribe medicine for their maladies or as an artist who enlightens their minds to the reality of life. So Williams is like the "indispensable angel" to his culture and people as Wallace Stevens stated in *The Necessary Ange'(1951)* that the function of the poet" is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imaginations becomes the light in the mind of the others. His role in short, is to help people to live their lives."<sup>15</sup>

'To Waken An Old Lady' is another poem that reflects the poet's realistic attitude as he depicts a dead person, who has lost

the very aspect of life in his body, and how he is fully isolated from his surroundings except for the profound feelings of mourning left in the hearts of his close friends.

*Old age is  
a flight of small  
cheeping birds  
skimming  
bare trees  
above a snow glaze.  
Gaining and falling  
they are buffeted  
by a dark wind –  
But what?  
On harsh weed stalks  
the flock has rested,  
the snow  
is covered with broken  
seed husks  
and the wind tempered  
by a shrill  
piping of plenty.*

(CP), p. 152-53.

This poem is a perfect whole – one simple and complex metaphor, as intricate as it is clear. There is a real progression of the imagery which seems to grow out of itself. It completely

satisfies Williams own demands upon poetry which he has presented earlier in his views.

Despite the uncertainty of the poem as a whole, there is relaxed even confident quietness in the opening six lines. This opening can be said to suggest a style unlike anything else in the twentieth century; a style towards which Williams might well have moved – or through which he would have passed to something else – had he continued to write for a few more decades. Ezra Pound bears witness for Williams' originality and creativeness when he says" there is a distinctness and colour...but there is beyond these qualities the absolute conviction of a man with his own feet on the soil personally and particularly his own. He is rooted .He at times almost inarticulate, but he is never dry, never without sap in abundance."<sup>16</sup>

The readers receive an impression of excitement so intense that the declared and the actual subject of the poem is as if it were dissolved away by it. It is almost impossible not to forget that it is all about (death), there is direct communication of emotion which grows swifter and swifter, till the final picture of the half visual half abstract, it touches a consummation: the image is not merely stamped in the readers minds by emotional force of the poem, but the image gathers up, clinches, makes

tangible, the emotional content of the poem. It is the flower of the plant, the purpose and the essence of the created things.

### **1- iii Conclusion**

William Carlos Williams presents his attitude about death in a very remarkable manner, reflecting certain aspects of realities about death and its associations with human life after he has closely scrutinized it in hospital. Believing in the circle of life and the myth of regeneration, Williams affirms that life can not be felt without death which paves the life to conspicuous reality of man's apprehension to his position in the universe. Death preserves man and keeps its qualities like the falling leaves which protect and preserve the seeds from annihilation. So, they will find way for budding in fertility despite being covered by superficial death. In doing so, the poet associates the human nature with the regenerative nature of the plants.

Optimism is conspicuously disclosed in Williams' poetic writings as he marks: "seeing the leaves dropping from high and low branches the thought arises: this day of all others is the one chosen, all other days fall away from it on other side and only itself remains in perfect fullness... it must build its perfection."<sup>17</sup> William conveys his notion that death is a necessity to feel and enjoy the meanings of life. Hence, he has no grudge with death, since it is a prerequisite for renewal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Malcolm Brinnin, ed. *William Carlos Williams*, (U.S.A.: Lund Press, Inc.1967), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 48-9.

<sup>3</sup>Mike Weaver, ed., *William Carlos Williams: The American Background*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>John C. Thirwall, ed., *The Selected letters of William Carlos Williams* ( New York: McDowel, Obolensky Inc., 1957), p. 330.

<sup>5</sup>William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume One 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz,Christopher MacGown, ( New York: New Directions Publishing Corporations, 1986), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Rod Townly, *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, (Ithica: Corneil University Press, 1975), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>M. H Abrams ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 1*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 616.

<sup>8</sup>Williams Marling ed., *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909 – 1923*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 166.

<sup>9</sup>James E. Breslin ed., *William Carlos Williams An American Artist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 43.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Dickran Tashjian ed., *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920 – 1940* (New York: University of California Press Ltd., 1970), p. 74.

<sup>13</sup>Raman Selden, ed., *Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present*, (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1988), p. 404.

<sup>14</sup>Benjamin Sankey ed., *A Companion to William Carlos Williams's Paterson*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Raman Selden, ed., *Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Marianne Moore, "Three Essays on Williams" in *William Carlos Williams a Collection of Critical Essays* ed. by J. Hillis Miller, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup>Ann W. Fisher–Wirth ed., *William Carlos Williams and Autobiography*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 29.

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## الخلاصة

يعتبر الشاعر وليام كارلوس وليامز ( 1883-1963) من رواد الشعر الأمريكي الحديث وقد اتسم وليامز بمهارات عديدة فكان روائيا ورساما وناقدا وطبيب توليد حيث انه استكشف كل مجالات الحياة بنظرة الطبيب الفاحصة. رافدا للأدب الانكليزي بإسهامات عديدة باتت شاهداً على قدرته المؤثرة و نظرتة الشمولية للحياة بعين الأديب المبدع.

كان اهتمام الشاعر الرئيس ينصب على تطبيق الشعور والذكاء المحلي لاختراع تركيب شعري قادر على صياغة الخبرات بدون اي تشويه لها. حيث انه ركز على الدور الريادي للأدب بصورة عامة والشعر بصورة خاصة لإبراز نوع جديد من الدقة لتمثيل الخبرة، وللوصول الى ذلك توجب على الكاتب ان يكون قارءا لنفسه ملاحظا دقيقا لها عند العمل.

لقد تناول وليامز فكرة الموت من عدة جوانب مجسدا ذلك في الكثير من قصائده على سبيل المثال " الطفل الميت "، " الموت"، "الظل"، " اشجار الشتاء"، "حلاق الموت" و قصيدته " لإيفاظ امرأة مسنة" والتي كشفت في طياتها توجهها بارزا قاده الشاعر الى مفهوم الموت وكل ما يرتبط به من تداعيات ، متحصلا له بخبرة الطبيب الأمريكي الذي لاحظ الإنسان منذ ولادته وحتى مماته. يهدف البحث الى إثبات ذلك التوجه وبيان نظرة الشاعر سواء كانت سلبية ام ايجابية وكذلك مفهومه عن التجدد وانبعاث الحياة.