

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 7: Marianne Moore (1887-1972)

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Source: 1995 *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*

"Poetry is a peerless proficiency of the imagination." - MM

A keen observer, Marianne Moore worked as a book reviewer, translator, essayist and poet. She was a devoted baseball fan and was invited to throw out the first ball at the start of the 1968 season at Yankee Stadium. In 1935, T. S. Eliot wrote that her poems are "part of the body of durable poetry written in our time, in which an original sensibility and an alert intelligence and deep feeling have been engaged in maintaining the life of the English language." Many of Moore's poems have been compared to the metaphysical satires of John Donne, in which the initial idea has been extended by metaphors to new dimensions, expressed in pure language.

Primary Works

Poems, 1921; *Observations*, 1924; *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, 1936; *What Are Years*, 1941; *Nevertheless*, 1944; *Collected Poems*, 1951; *The Complete Poems*, 1981; *The Complete Prose*, 1989.

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| [Top](#) | Marianne Moore (1887-1972): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Sonia Price

Marianne Craig Moore was born 15 November 1887 in Kirkwood, Missouri. She was the younger of two children. Her engineer father suffered a nervous breakdown and was committed to an institution for the mentally ill. Her mother, Mary Warner Moore influenced Moore's literary disposition. Moore majored in biology and histology at Byrn Mawr College, where she received an A.B. degree in 1909. Marianne Moore was known as a subjective, an introspective, and a personal poet. Her poetry is descriptive, reflective and gives detailed descriptions of landscapes, animals, or objects. "Miss Moore's poems," wrote W.H. Auden, "are an example of a kind of art which is not as common as it should be; they delight, not only because they are intelligent, sensitive and beautifully written, but also because they convince the reader that they have been written by someone who is personally good" (Nitchie 170). Marianne Moore's poems are as unique and modern as American apple pie.

"Of her education as a poet, Moore wrote that the most important influence on her style was ethical, and she linked the statement with the advice of her brother, Warner, who "once said of a florid piece of description, Starve it down and make it run' " (Phillips 279). Marianne Moore had a vivid sense of writing with precision of language and thought. Her poems are constructions, preconceived patterns, syllabic patterns, and rhymes which are unmistakably individualized.

Marianne Moore contributed her stories and poems to the college literary magazine and in 1915, two of her poems were published and appeared in the London magazine, the Egoist. In 1918, Marianne moves to New York with her mother and bursts into the literary scene. In 1921, twenty four of her poems were published by the Egoist press in London under the title "Poems." The publication of "Poems" put Marianne Moore into a distinguished company of America Poets such

as Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot.

In 1924, "Observations", which contained fifty-three poems such as "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish," "To a Snail," and "Nothing Will Cure the Sick Lion but to Eat an Ape" were published by the Dial Press. One year later, "Observations" received the Dial Award of two thousand dollars for recognition of distinguished services to American letters. In 1925, Marianne Moore joined the Dial Magazine as acting editor and one year later became editor of the best known American magazine of literature and art during the 1920's. Marianne worked at the Dial for four years until it ceased publication in July, 1929.

In 1929, Marianne Moore and her mother move to Brooklyn to be near her brother Warner who was stationed at the Brooklyn Naval Yard. During the period of 1925-1932, Critics agree that because Marianne Moore wrote only three poems during the period of 1925 through 1932, her poetry conscious or unconscious had its cost. Between the 1932-1935, Marianne Moore displays a confident determination in her writings to be herself. She is described by T.S. Eliot as one of the few writers who made a contribution to the language. Moore's constant concern with language, thought, and grace is shown in all of her poems. "Her prosaic, stylized poems retrieve the lost art of conversation through versification- they dance a courtly minuet through a set of intricate steps and measures for which she has set the rhythm and called the tune"(Stauffer 300).

In 1935, T.S. Eliot and friends encourage Marianne to bring out "Selected Poems". "Selected Poems" included forty two poems from "Observations," and nine other poems which included "The Steeplejack," "The Hero," "The Jerboa," "Camellia Sabina," "No Swan So Fine," "The Plumet Basilisk," "The Frigate Pelican," "The Buffalo," and "Nine Nectarines". The poems "The Jerboa," "The Pangolin," "The Buffalo," and "The Frigate Pelican" are Moore's poems of animals which today are considered famous.

By 1942 only 864 copies of the American edition of "Selected Poems" were sold. In 1940, the remaining 500 copies were sold to the Gotham Book Mart for thirty cents apiece. "To have had the book printed, " the poet wrote, " is the main thing, & all will be well if I can manage to produce some first rate stuff"(Phillips 15-16).

During the next nineteen years, Marianne Moore won several awards for her poetry. Some of the awards given to Marianne Moore were the Ernest Hartstock Memorial Prize, (1935), The Shelley Memorial Award, (1941), The Harriet Monroe Poetry Award, (1944), and the Contemporary Poetry Patrons' Prize, (1945). In 1951, at the age of sixty-four, Marianne Moore published her "Collected Poems". Her "Collected Poems" consisted of earlier poems and nine "hitherto uncollected" items. "Collected Poems" recognized for its distinction instead of size received the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Award.

In 1945, Marianne Moore worked for nine years translating "The Fable of La Fontaine". She worked continuously from morning to night. She completely translated the whole set of poems four times. Some of the selections from "The Fable of La Fontaine" are "The Lion in Love," "The Sun and The Frogs," "The Animals Sick of the Plague," and "The Head and Tail of the Serpent". After years of translation, the "Fables" were finally published in 1953, and 1954. Reviewing the "Fables", Hugh Kenner declared: "Miss Moore's solid achievement is . . . to have discovered the principles of a badly needed idiom, urbane without slickness and brisk without imprecision"(Nitchie 10).

In 1962, the National Institute of Arts and Letters observe her seventy-fifth birthday and Brandeis University awards her prize and medal for outstanding achievement in poetry. In 1966, Marianne Moore moves to Manhattan because it was no longer safe to live on Cumberland Street. In 1967, "Complete Poems" are published and in 1968, Marianne wins National Medal for Literature and throws out first baseball of season at Yankee Stadium. In 1970, Marianne Moore publishes her final poem called "A Magician's Retreat". On February 5, 1972, Miss Marianne Moore passes away in New York City. After fifty years of writing and publishing modern poetry, Marianne Moore exits the public limelight as the greatest women poet of the century.

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Study Questions

1. Moore states in her poem "Poetry," that poems are important, "not because a / high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because / they are / useful." How can a poem be "useful"? How can poetry be appreciated if not through "high sounding interpretations"?
2. "The Pangolin" starts in a seemingly casual manner – "Another armored animal" – but moves quickly into exact, patient observation of the animal's structure and behavior. Is the speaker coolly rational? Delighted? Or ... ? What kind of grace is the ultimate subject of this poem?
3. In "Nevertheless" how can a strawberry resemble 'a hedgehog or a star/fish'? How do apple seeds, the rubber plant, and the prickly-pear prove the point "Victory won't come / to me unless I go / to it ..."?
4. Study Moore's work for explicit statements about what poetry is and does. Analyze these statements in light of class discussion, and construct a prose version of her poetic theory.

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