

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

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Chapter 7: William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

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Primary Works

Poetry: *Poems*, 1909; *The Tempers*, 1913; *Al Que Quiere!*, 1917; *Sour Grapes*, 1921; *Collected Poems 1906-1938*, 1938; *Paterson*, 1946; *The Desert Music*, 1954; *Journey to Love*, 1955; *Pictures from Breghel*, 1962.

Fiction: *The Great American Novel*, 1923; *A Voyage to Pagany*, 1928; *Trilogy: White Mule*, 1937; *In the Money*, 1940; and *The Build-Up*, 1952.

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| [Top](#) | William Carlos Williams (1883-1963): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Kelli Hamilton

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey on September 17, 1883. His father, William George Williams, was of English and Danish blood, born in England but brought up in the West Indies. His mother, Raquel Helene (Elena) Hoheb was born in Puerto Rico and was of French-Spanish blood (Millett 646). Williams only brother, Edgar, was born when he was thirteen months old. William Carlos remarked, "Ed and I grew up together to become as one person. All that I experienced as a growing child and up to the time of my marriage was shared with him" (Williams 11). Another person who seemed to have had an influence on Williams was his English grandmother, Emily Dickinson Wellcome, who lived with his family for some time. His grandmother and mother competed for him. There were males, his father and two uncles living in the home, but it was the women who had him in charge and both of them wanted to make him into a gentleman. He alternately speaks gently and fiercely of them. They continually appear in his writings but the fierce grandmother comes off best, since two of his very best and fiercest poems, *Dedication For A Plot Of Ground* and *The Wanderer*, describe her directly (Whittemore 10).

Until 1897, William Carlos attended school in Rutherford. While his father would be in Buenos Aires for a year to set up a factory for the manufacture of Florida Water, William Carlos, his mother, and brother went to stay in Europe. William Carlos was sent to school at the Chateau de Lancy near Geneva, Switzerland (Williams 28-29). Staying in Paris in 1899 formed a close friendship that lasted until Demuth's untimely death due to an insulin overdose (Williams 152).

In the spring of 1899, when the family returned to America, William Carlos reentered his classes in the Rutherford Public School. It was his first year in high school in America and after attending the better schools of Europe, and becoming a little wilder since turning the age of sixteen, his grades were not encouraging to his parents. He was then enrolled in a New York City high school. It was the best high school in the East, Horace Mann (Williams 43). It was while attending the Horace Mann School, under the tutelage of a man, Uncle Billy Abbott, that William Carlos for the first time in his life felt the excitement of great books. It was only a beginning. Williams remembers "I had no full realization of what was taking place but I was crazy about those classes, though I wouldn't have acknowledged it to anyone. For the first time I had actually looked at a poem and it had interested me" (Williams 44-45).

Williams entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1902. He enjoyed the study of medicine but found it impossible to keep his concentration on it. After barely starting his studies he wanted to quit them and devote his time to writing. But it was money that finally made Williams decide to continue medicine, for he realized "I was determined to be a poet; only medicine, a job I enjoyed, would make it possible for me to live and write as I wanted to" (Williams 50-51). While in attendance at the University of Pennsylvania, William Carlos met and became friends with Hilda Doolittle (H.D) and Ezra Pound, who at that time were aspiring poets themselves (Williams 51). He also met an aspiring artist named Charles Demuth. William Carlos attended the Lycee Condorcet, one of the best high schools of Paris (Williams 35).

By 1906, Williams graduated with a medical degree, and was chosen as an intern at the old French Hospital in New York. The following year, he interned at the Nursery and Child's Hospital (Whitaker 13). Williams then completed a year of graduate study in pediatrics in Leipzig, Germany and returned to Rutherford, in 1910, where he began work as a general practitioner (Millett 646). publication and was depressed by its reception (Whittemore 52). Although Williams had begun writing while in college, it wasn't until 1914, that he was introduced to the public as an Imagist, with the publication of some of his work in the literary magazine the *Glebe* (Millett 646).

In December 1912, William Carlos married Florence Herman. Their first son, William Eric Williams, was born in 1914 and their second son, Paul, was born in 1916. When Florence became pregnant her father, Pa Herman, helped them purchase a house. The house they bought was on 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford, New Jersey. They continued to live in this home and William Carlos practiced medicine out of it for the rest of their lives (Whittemore 139). During her later years, while still living in the home, William Carlos' wife Florence had the satisfaction of finding the house declared a "state monument" (Whittemore 145).

William Carlos remembers always wanting to write. He felt it was necessary to him, it permitted him to express what he'd been turning over in his head (Kunitz 1525). A lot of what was going on in Williams' head, evident from the young age of nine, was his love of trees and especially of flowers. According to Alan Ostrom "Flowers are the subject of William Carlos Williams' poems; familiar, ordinary things" (3). Ostrom also notes that "Williams has insisted, in prose theory as in poetic practice, upon the necessity for drawing the poem's materials from the familiar world, and in so doing he has turned frequently to the world of nature, and of flowers especially, for his particulars" (3). This is evident in his book of poems, *A Que Quiere* published in 1917 and *Spring and All* published in 1922 (Whitaker 38,60).

| [Top](#) | William Carlos once said "I feel I inherited the strange personality traits of my mother. Changing from being warm and outgoing to moody, morose, and melancholy" (Whittemore 16). William Carlos was a man who always lived life under a strain- physical, financial, moral, but especially emotional. What was going on through his innards was what gave him the versatile range of his writings (Kunitz 1525). Vivienne Koch finds a continuity in his work, over its span of more than four decades, in the search for the knowledge of self. Koch feels:

It is not extravagant to say that Williams throughout all his difficult and passionate explorations has sought precisely that: to know of his situation what it does to him and with him and thus, in the end, to discover its nature, and so, perhaps, his own (1090).

It was William Carlos' dark side coming out with his writing of *Kora in Hell* in 1920. In the book, the hero regularly steals into the darkneses, sometimes to be lonely and free, sometimes for trysts. As Whittemore suggests "What the book was really saying was personal and not literary. That Williams was wandering through the Passaic world as his mother had wandered through Rome, searching out himself, truth, and beauty" (157). It was Williams lighter side that must have prompted him to write his novel *White Mule* in 1937, which focused on the birth and early years of his wife, Flossie (Whittemore 249).

As a true American Modernist writer, Williams was very interested in the technical problems of modern verse. According to Fred Millett:

Williams felt that the proper use of the American, rather than the English, language is essential for modern American poetry, and he believes that all art depends for its assurance and firmness upon local and immediate tradition. It is the task of the modern American poet to discover a form appropriate to America (646).

In 1946, William published the first of the four books of his major poetic work *Paterson*. This poem has been called his "personal epic". Robert Lowell sees it as "Whitman's America, grown pathetic and tragic...No poet has written of it with such a combination of brilliance, sympathy, and experience, with such alertness and energy" (Kunitz 1090).

Although not the most well known of writers, William Carlos Williams has received a number of honors in recognition of his work. His first recognition came in 1926 when he was given the Dial Award. In 1948 he received the Loines Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and was elected a member of the group in 1950. Also in 1950 Williams received the National Book Award for poetry. In 1952 he was appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (although he did not occupy the office because of an attack on his politics), and in 1953 he and Archibald Macleish were named double winners of the Bollingen prize in poetry for 1952, awarded by the Yale University Library. In 1954 Williams received the Levinson Prize for Poetry and in 1955 he received the Oscar Blumenthal Award (Whitaker 14-15).

Dr. Williams has honorary degrees from the University of Buffalo (1946), Rutgers University (1950), Bard College (1950), and the University of Pennsylvania (1952) (Whitaker 15).

A series of strokes forced Dr. Williams, in 1951, to retire and turn over his medical practice to his son, William Eric (Whitaker 15). William Carlos Williams died March 4, 1963 in Rutherford, New Jersey of cerebral thrombosis (Whittemore 350). Williams was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *Pictures from Brueghel* and the Gold Medal for Poetry of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (Whittemore 354). Alan Ostrom notes:

Over the last few years Williams has suddenly become popular, not only in the avant-garde circles but in the academic world, in college courses in American Literature. Students find themselves to his hopelessly human view of things, and teachers discover that the poems lend themselves marvelously to analysis and interpretation (xi).

Linda Wagner-Martin also remarks that "the writings of William Carlos Williams are a nearly inexhaustible reservoir of twentieth-century American themes and images, given expression through a voice unique in the history of literature (6)

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Study Questions

1. Some of William's poems directly or indirectly address the writing of poetry. Discuss what the following poems tell us about his poetic theory: "Portrait of a Lady," "Spring and All," "The Wind Increases," "The Term."
2. Analyze the specific features of Williams's use of language in "To Elsie."
3. Describe the form Williams invents in "The Ivy Crown." Discuss the effects this form has on the reader. How does the form contribute to a reader's understanding of the poem?
4. Compare the two Williams poems that derive from paintings by Brueghel: "The Dance " and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Locate and study these paintings in the library. What relationship does Williams achieve between the visual and the verbal experience? Is it necessary to see the paintings to "see" the poems?

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