



The Influence of the Doctor's Mind Style in *Spring and All* on William Carlos Williams's Poetry Creation

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Abstract

This article intends to investigate the doctor's mind style on William Carlos Williams in his collection of poems *Spring and All*. Research shows that Williams's doctor's life makes him shape a different view of the world. He always observes something difficult or challenging at first and notices something easy and comfortable at last. This paper concludes that Williams's doctor's mind style exerts influence on his creation of poetry both in content and in form.

Keywords: William Carlos Williams, doctor's mind style, *Spring and All*

1. Introduction

William Carlos Williams is a major figure in the pantheon of American poets. He is a prolific poet and a serious thinker about poetry and language. The publication of *Spring and All* in 1923 marks his reputation as a major poet. *Spring and All* is a serial poem consisting of twenty-seven untitled but numbered poems introduced and accompanied throughout by a sometimes fierce, sometimes flamboyant prose polemic.

Spring and All has aroused extensive concerns among scholars (e.g., Strobel 1923; Rosenfeld 1961; Breslin 1970; Bremen 1993; Read 2009) since its publication. Bell (2002) studies Nietzschean Quietude in *Spring and All*. He analyzes the adjectives in this collection of poems. For instance, in the first poem "By the road to the contagious hospital", Bell suggests that "the adjectival noise and mess of the poem's third stanza are replaced by adjectival quiet and clear definition – confusing approximation is supplanted by exactitude; and this is how the poem chooses to think about the most generative of all seasonal changes" (p. 499), and that "its use of the quiet and the still warrant a reading that goes beyond pastoral adjustment to offer a cultural diagnosis" (p. 500). Schuster (2007) examines the contexts of an "anthropological imaginary" that informs a close reading of *Spring and All*. His research shows that "Williams's local is the result of a pattern of dislocation in modernity, which Williams incorporates in his poems and turns back against the disembodied scientific language of anthropology that cannot record the participant-observer's disruption and desire" (p. 116). Wallaert (2005) regards *Spring and All* as an ecopoetics, an environmental ethics that anticipates contemporary poststructuralist concerns. His research suggests "some ways in which an understanding of Williams's poetics may help us better understand the way language shapes our relationship with the natural world" (p. 80). Strobel (1923) recognizes what a kind of person Williams is, suggesting that "ten poems may have so many smart, tiresome, intricate, swaggering phrases to hide a frightened spirit and a little beauty!" (p. 105).

Over all, these researches are mainly on the themes of nature, modernism and environmental ethics etc. in *Spring and All*, but seldom on the mind style of Williams's doctor behind the poems. As we all know, Williams lives a double life. Creating poems and writing novels are only his interest. Actually, He is a true country doctor in Rutherford, N.J. He writes prescriptions, visits the sick and the poor, and delivers thousands of babies during his long years of practice. The life of poet and the life of doctor influence each other. The poet makes the doctor a more humane and altruistic ministrant to the sick. In return, the doctor influences the way how a poet views the world. This article is intended to demonstrate the influence of William Carlos Williams's life of doctor on his poetry creation both in content and in form in *Spring and All*.

2. The Influence on Content

What is the doctors' mind style? What is the doctors' value of the world? What is the particularity of the doctors' job? It is too abstract to give exact answers to these questions. But one thing is for sure that doctors have to face and treat many patients everyday. Those who suffer from pain shape doctors' disposition and their view of the world. As for William Carlos Williams, his view of the world is presented in his poems. The following is the detailed explanation, taking the first poem "By the road to the contagious hospital" and the 21st poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" in *Spring and All* as examples. The first poem shows the different opinions on spring among poets and the "The Red Wheelbarrow" implies Williams's unique perspective.

There are many poets and writers who describe or praise spring in the world from the ancient to the contemporary times, such as Britain poet Thomas Nashe who creates "Spring", American poet E. E. Cummings who writes "In Just"

and American poet Robert Frost who has “A Prayer in Spring” etc. The sceneries of spring in their poems are all vigorous. For example, Thomas Nashe praises spring in “Spring” that there are both concrete and abstract images to portray a fresh spring. Spring is sweet and pleasant; everything blooms. Plants like palm and may make country houses gay, fields breathe sweet and the daisies kiss our feet. People like maids are happy to dance in a ring, young lovers meet each other in this romantic season, old wives enjoy the nice sunning, and shepherds pipe all day. Animals such as pretty birds sing merrily, lambs frisk and play. Everything comes back to life. After reading such a poem, readers will enter a gay and merry spring and feel better. The same is true for E. E. Cummings’s “In Just”. When spring is coming, the world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful. A man who sells the balloon sees a group of children playing games. In turn, curious about the man who sells balloons, eddieandbill come running from marbles and piracies and bettyandisbel come dancing from hop-scotch and jump-rope. This poem is a picture where children yearn for spring and pursue happiness. Spring is a pleasant season and it is a peaceful and happy beginning of this year.

Therefore, spring is full of life in the poems of Thomas Nashe and E. E. Cummings. However, in William Carlos Williams’s eyes, spring is different from theirs. Williams’s feelings toward spring are changing. There are two kinds of images, lifeless and vigorous, in “By the road to the contagious hospital”. In the first five stanzas, lifeless images come into eyes, and in the final two stanzas, vigorous images are in sight.

By the road to the contagious hospital
 under the surge of the blue
 mottled clouds driven from the
 northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
 waste of broad, muddy fields
 brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen
 patches of standing water
 the scattering of tall trees
 All along the road the reddish
 purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
 stuff of bushes and small trees
 with dead, brown leaves under them
 leafless vines—
 Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
 dazed spring approaches—
 They enter the new world naked,
 cold, uncertain of all
 save that they enter. All about them
 the cold, familiar wind—
 Now the grass, tomorrow
 the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
 One by one objects are defined—
 It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf
 But now the stark dignity of
 entrance—Still, the profound change
 has come upon them: rooted, they
 grip down and begin to awaken

One day by the road to the contagious hospital, Williams sees something without vitality. The wind is cold, the weeds are dried, the water is standing, the leaves are dead and the vines are leafless. The spring is sluggishly dazed for Williams. After reading these lines, readers might feel depressed and doubt whether it is the season of spring. Isn’t spring sunny? Isn’t the breeze warm? When readers doubt about the description of the spring by William Carlos Williams, however, a world teeming with life suddenly appears. The grass and the wildcarrot leaf are going to come up. The profound change spring brings has come upon everything. The plants are rooted and grip down and begin to awaken. Finally, spring is the year’s pleasant king.

Why lifeless things come into view first and vigorous things last? It is because spring is just like a patient coming to Williams. Lifeless things are patients who suffer from disease and vigorous things are the symbol of people who recover. Williams works in the hospital and everyday he faces quantities of patients, including pregnant women and newborn babies. Every time Williams sees those patients, the painful and wretched expressions catch his eyes. Similarly, when he sees the scenery in spring, something painful and lifeless naturally attracts Williams’s attention. After the arrival of patients, what Williams has to do is to save them from illness. If the patient is a pregnant woman, Williams has to keep her calm and is prepared well to deliver a baby. After the operation, the patient will recover and the baby was born. Both the family and obstetrician relax and are delighted at the birth of new baby. If the patient is a baby, Williams has to fight with virus and treats the baby for sickness. This seems to be common with the nature. At first, the lifeless things are viruses and painful patients, but through the treatment of doctors, viruses are destroyed and painful patients battle back to health. Therefore, vigorous things, grass and wildcarrot leaf, appear in vision of Williams

at last.

The same is true for “The Red Wheelbarrow”.

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.

This poem portrays what is on a red wheelbarrow and where it is. So many things are on this red wheelbarrow and the red wheelbarrow is glazed with rain beside the white chickens. Williams’s focalization is from the wheelbarrow to its surroundings. First, there are many things on the wheelbarrow and the wheelbarrow is under pressure. Second, Williams notices that the wheelbarrow is glazed with rain and it is beside the white chickens. If Williams sees the white chickens at first and then notices the things on the wheelbarrow, what is the effect? To begin with, readers may feel quiet and peaceful when they read the beautiful scene where there are chickens walking around the red wheelbarrow glazed with the rainwater. However, their feelings might change suddenly because they see a red wheelbarrow loaded with so many things. Readers may feel pressed as the red wheelbarrow does. If the poem was written in such a way, the scene would be changed from free to be oppressed, and the mood would be transferred from being easy and pleasant to being depressed and constrained. The keynote of this poem would be passive and pessimistic.

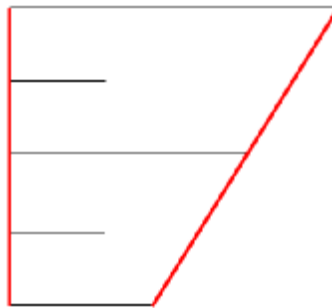
Nevertheless, Williams’s version is opposite. He is optimistic and positive. What appears first in front of Williams is always something difficult and challenging and what occurs next is something cozy and comfortable. It is the same with his work of doctor. Williams is like this red wheelbarrow. The red wheelbarrow is loaded with many things and Williams have to treat many patients. Both the wheelbarrow and Williams are under pressure. After the rain, the red wheelbarrow is glazed with rainwater and the white chickens are walking around it. The red wheelbarrow is welcomed by the white chickens. For Williams, after the treatment and operation, he is the one to whom patients want to express their gratitude and he can relax and enjoy the peace life. Therefore, Williams creates the present version “The Red Wheelbarrow”.

As a matter of fact, the order in which different images appear reflects the process of the daily work of Williams in the hospital. Through the demonstration of the content in “By the road to the contagious hospital” and “The Red Wheelbarrow”, it can be proved that the doctor’s mind style exerts influence on Williams’s view of world.

3. Influence on form

Williams’ career of doctor has an impact on his writing of poetry not only in content but also in form. The images Williams focalizes are changing. In the same way, the structure varies regularly.

In “By the road to the contagious hospital”, there are seven stanzas. It can be divided into two main parts. The first part includes the first five stanzas, and the second part consists of the final two stanzas. In the first part, lines in the stanza of odd number decrease regularly, and those in the stanza of even number remain constant. That is, the first stanza and the second stanza are six lines and two lines respectively; the third stanza and the fourth stanza are five lines and two lines correspondingly; the fifth stanza has four lines. As a result, the configuration or the shape of the first part is like an inverted right-angled trapezium structure. We can see in figure (1).



(1)

The feature of an inverted right-angled trapezium structure is that the upper part is larger than the lower part, so it cannot stand steadily. Such a kind of structure gives people a feeling of depression and a sense of insecurity. However, the second part of this poem returns to be a steady structure, a square structure. Lines of both the sixth stanza and the final stanza are four. See figure (2).



(2)

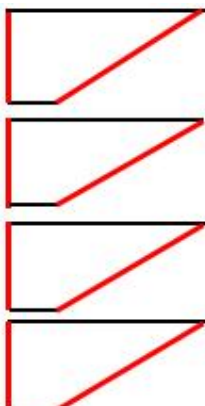
The bottom is the same as the top. Such a kind of structure is steady and readers might feel a sense of security. Therefore, the structure is transferred from an inverted right-angled trapezium to a square structure. With the variation of the structure, Williams feels suppressed at first and relaxed at last, so do readers.

What is the relationship between the variation of structures and Williams's doctor's mind style? Just as the explanation in the section 2.1, Williams works in the hospital and he has to meet the challenge and battle with the illness to save people everyday. The variation of structures reflects Williams's attitude toward the patients. At the beginning, patients feel painful and doctors like Williams feel the pressure of treating them. Therefore, the structure of the first part is an unsteady inverted right-angled trapezium which gives people the sense of insecurity. In the same way, it is the symbol of a big challenge for doctors because they are actually not sure whether they could cure patients or not. That is why only Williams, a doctor, could create such a structure. Generally, patients will recover after the treatment and doctors thus can breathe a sigh of relief. Hence, the structure of the second part is the square structure. It shows both patients and doctors' sense of security. Most importantly, lines in the final stanza are the same in length as those of the seventh stanza. Put it another way, in the last two stanzas the number of lines is steady. The steady number of the final two stanzas is symbolic. Everything is down and the spring is coming.

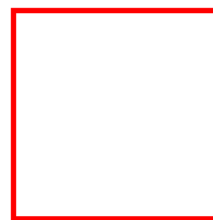
How about "The Red Wheelbarrow"? There are four stanzas in this poem and in each stanza there are two lines. The first line has three words and the second line has only one word. The structure of each stanza is an inverted right-angled trapezium structure. See figure (3). There are in all four inverted right-angled trapezium structures in this poem. As is explained above, an inverted right-angled trapezium structure gives people feelings of depressed and sense of insecurity. Four unsteady structures may drive a person mad. See figure (4). Four separate inverted right-angled trapezium structures represent the great pressure of the red wheelbarrow as well as doctors. Williams is a doctor and he knows well how pressure doctors have to bear. As a consequence, Williams creates four inverted right-angled trapezium structure to indicate the pressure and responsibility of doctors when they treat patients. Nevertheless, if we regard the four separate structures as a whole, it is not separated any more. It is a firm square. See figure (5). The entirety means stable instead of unsteady. Doctors' life is like this firm square. Having overcome difficulties one by one, doctors become more confident and more proficient. Therefore, each stanza, namely, the part, stands for every problem doctors meet in their daily practice and the whole poem, that is, the whole, symbolizes the success and the regained confidence of doctors after their operation.



(3)



(4)



(5)

In brief, form also generates the meaning of the poem. Williams integrates the doctors' life with the poem in both the shift of the structure in "By the road to the contagious hospital" and the containment relationship between the part and the whole in "The Red Wheelbarrow". In return, it is the doctors' mind style that makes Williams create those poems.

4. Conclusion

Both the content and the form in poems are generators of meaning. The poet's mind style or consciousness can be sensed behind the poem. In *Spring and All*, Williams's doctor's mind style is presented. Through the complete demonstration of the content and the form in "By the road to the contagious hospital" and "The Red Wheelbarrow", this research comes to a conclusion that William Carlos Williams's doctor's life and mind style exert influence on his creation of poetry.

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