



Ecological Aspects of Carlos Williams' Poetry

A research paper,

By

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Abstract:

Increasing climate changes all over the world have recently gained much global attention due to their impacts on our environment and, therefore, quality of life. This paper investigates how poetry can express and promote creative communion with the Earth. In so doing, it will analyze the ecological aspects of the work of American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). This paper argues that Williams' poetry has always envisaged pastorals and, therefore, his poetics can be analyzed in terms of modern concepts of Green Poetry or Eco poetics. As will be argued, Williams engaged in eco-poetry both implicitly and explicitly, and, thus, he has been one of the pioneers in the domain of ecopoeisis. Maintaining the relationship between the poet and nature found in Romantic lyrical poetry, Williams' poetics expresses the inevitable interrelationship of not only the poet but also humanity and nature.



Through critical analysis, this paper will show how Williams' poetics reflects a mutual relationship with nature based on equality with other members within the biosphere. In other words, Williams' poetics underlines and undermines any concepts of human superiority to other creatures or nature itself.

Key Words: William Carlos Williams, eco-poetics, Green Poetry, global poetics

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Research Statement

Williams' eco-poetics extends the Romantic subjective experience with nature to a global experience in which the relationship between the poet, as representative of humanity, and nature is undoubtedly overlapping and reciprocal. In this respect, Williams' poetry contributes to what can be termed "ecological unconsciousness." From Williams' focus on his local milieu, this paper will end in deriving a global poetic understanding of the position of human beings within the natural world or the ecosystem in general. In so doing, it calls for global poetics that maintains such a bond between humanity and nature.

Research Objectives

An analysis of William Carlos Williams's poems will provide insight into how Williams explored the beauty and complexity of nature in his writing. Williams was a doctor and a poet, and his poems often blend his two passions. Many of his works focus on how humans interact with nature and how the environment can be seen as a source of healing.

Research Scope

Ecopoetics is a form of poetry that emphasizes the importance of nature, ecology, and the environment. Williams' work often depicted the beauty of the natural world and the



relationship between humans and nature. He used traditional poetic devices such as imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to create vivid scenes and express deep emotion. For example, in his poem “The Red Wheelbarrow”, he uses simple language to describe a wheelbarrow and a chicken in a farm yard, but the poem evokes a sense of wonder and awe for the beauty of the natural world. In other poems, Williams also explored themes such as death, love, and the consequences of industrialization on the environment. His work is important in illustrating the connections between humans and their environment, and how that relationship can be expressed through poetry.

Research Questions

This paper attempts to explore what makes ecopoetic writing unique compared to traditional poetic forms by answering the following questions:

1. How does it differ in terms of structure?
2. What kind of language does it employ?
3. How can we use eco-poetry as a tool for promoting environmental awareness?

Answering these questions will provide valuable insight into how best to move forward with furthering our understanding and appreciation for this new form of literary expression.



Introduction

William Carlos Williams is one of the most important American poets of the 20th century, and a key figure in the development of eco-poetics. His work often reflects his interest in and commitment to the environment and is characterized by his use of simple language and imagery. Williams often featured natural landscapes as an integral part of his works, and he often used the environment as a backdrop to explore the human experience. From his poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” to his epic, *Paterson*, Williams was a passionate advocate for the environment. He was an early pioneer of the ecological movement and his work reflects a deep concern for the environment and a commitment to its sustainability. He wrote about the beauty of nature and its importance to our lives, emphasizing the importance of preserving the environment for future generations.

In “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams uses simple language to describe a mundane scene. However, by looking at the poem through an ecopoetic lens, the poem takes on a new meaning. Nature is portrayed as a source of strength, healing, and joy. The poem’s simple language and short, concise lines emphasize the importance of small moments in life, and how even something as



small as watching a wheelbarrow in the rain can bring peace and comfort.

Williams' works also expressed a deep appreciation for the Earth and its creatures. He wrote poems about birds, rivers, and other creatures, and he often highlighted their connectedness to the environment and the fragility of life. His poems illustrate the fragility of the Earth and our need to cherish and protect it.

Williams' work represents a powerful call to action for environmental stewardship. His works serve as a reminder that our actions have an impact on the environment, and that we must take responsibility for our actions.

In "To a Poor Old Woman," Williams explores how nature can be a source of healing even in the bleakest of situations. The poem's narrator stands in awe of an old woman, and the connection between them is further strengthened by the image of the "green, pungent weeds" that surround them. The weeds represent the life and energy of nature, and the narrator's admiration of them reflects his admiration of the old woman. The poem subtly yet powerfully suggests that nature can be a source of healing, even in the most dire of circumstances.



Literature Review

For many critics, ecopoetry is not easily definable although it can simply be seen as a combination of ecology in the form of poetry or as a sort of poetic activism. In this sense, eco-poetics can be seen as an emerging genre that blends elements from both ecology and poetry, often exploring themes related to nature, sustainability, and environmentalism. As such, it has become increasingly popular among writers in recent years as a way to express their concern for this planet's future. John Elder explains that ecopoetry can be best understood "as a dialogue and an adventure rather than as an easy connection of any kind" (ix). For Scigaj, an ecopoem must present nature as "a separate and at least equal other" (6-7).

The anthology *Eco Poetry: A Collection* (2020) by Robert Hass features poems from a variety of contemporary eco-poets who address ecological issues such as extinction events caused by human activities, animal rights, pollution, deforestation, and climate change adaptation strategies. By showcasing these works together Hass provides readers with an opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue about our responsibility toward protecting natural systems for future generations.



In *Poetic Ecologies: Nature Writing & Environmental Justice*

(2019), Christopher Cokinos explores how poetry can be used as a tool for social justice advocacy when it comes to environmental matters—particularly those concerning marginalized communities often left out or ignored when discussing ecology-related policies or initiatives at large scales like global warming mitigation efforts etc. It also examines how poets are engaging in conversations around conservation through writing projects centered on specific ecosystems or species threatened due to human activities like mining operations or oil drilling sites etc. Ultimately, Cokinos argues that poetry can provide powerful insights into complex ecological problems while also creating space for healing amidst despairing times regarding humanity's current state of affairs vis à vis its relationship with nature overall.

In his *The Environmental Imagination* (1996), Lawrence Buell describes four qualities necessary to ecopoems:

- 1) the presence of the nonhuman as more than mere backdrop,
- 2) the expansion of human interest beyond humanity,
- 3) a sense of human accountability to the environment, and
- 4) treatment of the environment as a process rather than a constant or given (4)



Simply put, the goal of ecopoetry is to maintain a profound realization that all beings are equal members of this universe.

Williams' Ecopoetics

In his poem "The Rose," Williams provides a verbal adaptation of a 1914 cubist painting by Juan Gris. The poem opens with the vivid notion that "[t]he rose is obsolete" (1), and its petal "cuts without cutting / meets—nothing—renews / itself in metal and porcelain" (6-8). Here, nature is seen through the lenses of the artificial materiality of modernism. The rose in this poem seems to have its place in the present moment and even its place within a cosmic order by describing the rose as artificial at the beginning of the poem and then shifting to the natural description of the rose as an organic part of nature:

From the petal's edge a line starts

that being of steel

infinitely fine, infinitely

rigid penetrates

the Milky Way

without contact—lifting

from it—neither hanging

nor pushing (32-39)



In the previous lines, Williams through 'imagination', performs the blending of the organic and inorganic. Throughout his career, Williams' use of this rosy imagery will recur many times.

Carlos Williams' poem "Spring and All" speaks to the cyclical nature of life. In this poem, Williams juxtaposes images of death and rebirth in order to express his idea that life is an ever-changing cycle. The poem begins with an image of nature in its darkest winter state: "By the road to the contagious hospital" (1). This phrase sets up a bleak atmosphere that pervades throughout much of the work. As readers move through this landscape, they witness images such as "mud-spattered boots" (3) which further emphasize this somber tone. Williams uses vivid imagery to convey this message, as he describes "the crushed bodies" alongside "the spring rain / washing the ground." This contrast between destruction and renewal serves as a metaphor for how our lives can be both filled with pain yet also full of potential for growth.

Yet amidst all this darkness, there are signs that spring is coming: "The sky grows light again" (5), while birds sing their songs despite being surrounded by illness and death—a signifier of hope in difficult times. In addition to these symbols, Williams also uses personification when referring to nature itself; he writes



about how it has been waiting patiently for spring's arrival—almost as if it were alive itself: “the trees begin/ To awaken from their sleep...and stirs her wet feet among broken twigs on top Of mud-banks where small birds feed warily at dusk Among falling snowflakes’ fragments on white ground” (7-12). Here we see how even though things may seem dark now, soon enough something new will come around—just like Spring does every year after Winter passes away.

Throughout the poem, Williams emphasizes this belief in transformation by describing how new life emerges from old death: “The grain ripens / The tassels dry/ And fall/ Into heavy shocks about their feet . . . Involuntarily they smile.” By using these words together, Williams conveys not only physical change but emotional change as well; even though there has been loss along with gain, hope still remains alive within them. Additionally, through repetition such as when he writes “It was spring again,” Williams reinforces his point that despite all obstacles we face throughout our lives we will always eventually reach another season where things may look brighter than before. Thus, “Spring and All” expresses powerful ideas about resilience during difficult times while also celebrating new beginnings after periods of darkness or sorrow. Through its use of vivid language, metaphors, and repeated



phrases it captures feelings many people experience throughout their own personal journeys toward understanding what it means to live fully.

The ecopoetic themes found in *Spring and All*, such as the use of the local, the treatment of imagination as a natural force, and a biocentric poetic perspective, are also present in *Paterson*, but they are developed in a more nuanced manner. *Paterson* is a collection of five books, each exploring the city of Paterson, New Jersey in different ways. The work follows the life and musings of William Carlos Williams himself as he contemplates his hometown and its inhabitants. Throughout his journey, he reflects on various aspects including nature, history, and culture to form an intimate portrait of a place that has been both forgotten by time yet still holds great meaning for him personally.

The first book introduces us to Paterson itself with vivid descriptions that bring it to life for readers who have never seen it before or those who may be familiar with its landmarks but do not know much about its people or their stories. In this section, we also get glimpses into Williams' own thoughts on his hometown which give us insight into how deeply connected he feels towards this place despite having moved away years ago. The poem sets up the central theme of finding meaning in one's surroundings: "What



shall I say? That I have gone at dusk through narrow streets/ And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes/ Of factories.” This opening line immediately draws us into a world where beauty can be found amidst industrialization; something many readers will relate to even today.

As he progresses through each section of his poem—from ‘Sunday Morning’ to ‘A Voyage To The End Of Time’—Williams expands on these ideas while also exploring deeper philosophical questions about existence itself. Finally, *Book Five* brings everything full circle by bringing back original themes introduced earlier while also introducing new ones like death, illness, and love. Book I section III opens:

How strange you are, you idiot!
So you think because the rose
is red that you shall have the mastery?
The rose is green and will bloom,
overtopping you, green, livid
green when you shall no more speak, or
taste, or even be. My whole life has hung too long upon a
partial victory.
But, creature of the weather, I
don't want to go any faster than



I have to go to win.

Music it for yourself (29)

The rose as a metaphor is no longer valid here. Humanity's insistence that "the rose / is red," which is rooted in Romantic ideals, is at an end. Even after the reader and poet have both died and gone silent, the "livid green" power of nature, as seen through the poet's imagination, "overtops" the reader.

Moreover, the rose and the nature that gave birth to it will endure long after humanity and its language have ceased to "even be." Once more, humanity's value to itself is downplayed. Williams wants us to view ourselves as simply another species, as biocentrically as we can. The natural world is larger than us, and we are not even its most powerful component. At the end of Book II, section 2, Williams proclaims:

Why should I move from this place
where I was born? knowing
how futile would be the search
for you in the multiplicity
of your debacle. The world spreads
for me like a flower opening—and
will close for me as might a rose—
wither and fall upon the ground



and rot and be drawn up

into a flower again (79)

These lines express Williams' love for his hometown in which the powers of composition and decomposition, as represented by the writing process and nature's organic cycle, are regenerative. This gives the thread of the rose's bloom a comparatively reassuring conclusion.

Thus, "The Rose" gives Williams the chance to describe the natural image as it appears in modernity. It gives him the chance to demonstrate how cut off humanity has become from the local environment and the degraded state that results from that.

Williams' mastery of this desired reintegration on an even grander scale by incorporating not only his own poetic arguments but also various elements of nonfiction in the form of factual historical accounts, his own correspondence, and scientific data into the body of the poems. If the latter demonstrates Williams' experimentation with the integration of forms by abruptly switching between prose and poetry. The poems in *Paterson* demonstrate Williams mastering it on an even more ambitious scale.

The poems in *Paterson* make clear analogies between how poetry is created and how nature works. Through the course of the poems in that book, Williams specifically returns to the notion of



'imagination' illustrating how the poet transforms the world around him into something finer using metaphors like fire and radioactivity. Williams' "local as universal" philosophy is incorporated clearly in the first few pages of *Paterson*:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general [...]
– since we know nothing, pure
and simple, beyond
our own complexities

Here, the local characteristics are represented by the "particulars" and "our own complexities," which are made universal by the "general." While this seems to allude to humanity's sporadic myopia (as we focus too intently on our own self-interests), it also makes the case that by paying closer attention to what is right in front of us, we can learn to appreciate the universally applicable qualities of the local.

In his efforts to universalize *Paterson*, Williams is able to transcend space and time by focusing on the local landscape as well as its history and people. In other words, Williams applies the lessons learned from his own local ecosystem and trusts in their artistic applicability in more universal contexts, just as naturalists



tend to work within a given ecosystem in ecology. Moreover, the personification of the poem's setting, or the literal "bringing to life" of the landscape itself, is another ecological concept Williams uses throughout *Paterson*. It is introduced in the poem's opening.

The extent to which Williams treats the elements of his (and the poem's) surroundings as more than just a simple backdrop but as an essential component of the work's poetics makes his attempt to accomplish this significant. Williams' ecological interpretation of the landscape in *Paterson* acknowledges the environment as an active subject rather than a static object.

In Book III, entitled *The Library*, of *Paterson*, Williams begins by introducing a number of meteorological catastrophes that serve as the focal point for his reflections on the nature of the artist's imagination in the context microcosmic setting of the whole book.

They are all based on the factual compost from which Williams grows his poetic materials. Williams uses these calamities as a backdrop for Dr. Paterson, the poem's main character. For Sankey, "Paterson goes to the library and reads about the past of his region, hoping that in the past he can discover terms for understanding his own world" (116). These "terms" represent Williams' attempt to negotiate the place of imagination in his life and work. According to Williams, the only place for poetic invention



is within the objective reality of the Earth as observed and understood by humanity:

The province of the poem is the world.

When the sun rises, it rises in the poem

and when it sets darkness comes down

and the poem is dark (100)

Here, Williams views poetry as a reflection of reality and natural reality as its regulator. Later, he adds a few lines in which he sees poetry as a performance of that reality, one that the human soul seeks:

What language could allay our thirsts,

what winds lift us, what floods bear us past defeats

but song but deathless song? (108)

Williams also makes several references to a comparison between fire and imagination in Book III, most notably when he talks about how a flame-contact-damaged bottle. The fire represents the poet's imagination, and the bottle stands in for objective reality or, more metaphorically, the natural world:

An old bottle, mauled by fire

gets a new glaze, the glass warped

to a new distinction, reclaiming the undefined

Beat you



at your own game, Fire. Outlast you:

Poet Beats Fire at Its Own Game! The bottle!

the bottle! the bottle! the bottle! I

give you the bottle! What's burning

now, Fire? (118)

Here, the longevity of the poem, the “deathless song,” allows the poet to “Outlast” the destructive power of fire in this instance. The bottle is used by the poet as an illustration of the benefits of imagination and fire. He had mentioned his capacity to reframe fire in this new, positive light just a few stanzas earlier, “calling it good”.

Williams continues to explore the ecopoetic elements of his metaphor of a bottle being transformed by flame. After all, the bottle is a human creation using the naturally occurring element of stone. The artificial or cultural object of glass is produced by the melting of stone in the form of sand. After that, the glass can be shaped into bottles, which can be reshaped in the fire but not reformed. That is, it turned back into sand or stone by another flame.

Moreover, the bottle here represents language which is the cultural tool available to humans for interpreting their world, it is a human creation—a human interpretation of the natural world. That



natural world is given a “new glaze” and is “warped” to a “new distinction” when it encounters the poet’s imagination (fire), which is filtered and formed through language. Thus, language is both cultural and ecological, a product of human creativity and a reflection of how humanity expresses its place in the world’s broader ecology. Therefore, the imagination is both a part of nature and a driving force behind its (re)shaping. In *Spring and All*, Williams argues that his claims about how the imagination can enhance reality:

We shall not get to the bottom:

death is a hole

in which we are all buried

Gentile and Jew

The flower dies down

and rots away .

But there is a hole

in the bottom of the bag.

It is the imagination

which cannot be fathomed

It is through this hole

we escape (210)



Here, it is the point where Williams' use of the imagination ultimately serves as a means of escaping death.

As seen in all of the selections quoted above, there is an implicit argument for the use of local materials as material for artistic creation because the poems in *Paterson* center Williams' narrative within a setting that is only a few minutes from his own home and maintains that focus throughout its five distinct books.

Williams is also putting his (eco)poetics of the imagination into action in the book *Paterson*, just like in *Spring and All*. Williams' employs fire, a plant's seed, and Elsie's "broken brain" and its "voluptuous water" as metaphorical representations of the imagination in natural settings as well as lessons in how to use it.

We can better understand the extent to which ecopoetry was more than just a topic that occasionally appeared in some works by comparing these two works. Rather, it was a pervasive undercurrent throughout Williams's body of work.

Conclusion

The poetry of William Carlos Williams has been widely celebrated for its unique approach to modernism and its innovative use of language and rhythm. In particular, Williams' work has been praised for its eco-poetics, or its focus on the environment as a source of poetic inspiration and as an integral part of the



experience of reading his poetry. This paper will explore the various ways in which Williams incorporates themes of nature and ecology into his poetry, both explicitly and implicitly.

Firstly, Williams often directly references nature in his poetry by writing about specific plants, animals, and landscapes. For example, in "The Red Wheelbarrow," Williams paints a vivid picture of a farm and its inhabitants, even going so far as to personify the chickens. This direct reference to nature helps to ground the poem in a specific setting, while simultaneously providing a source of imagery and symbolism.

In addition to explicit references to nature, Williams also incorporates underlying eco-poetic themes and messages into his poetry. In "The Great Figure," for instance, the poem discusses a fire engine passing through a city, with the "treading" of the engine likened to the movements of a "great figure." The poem's use of imagery and symbolism can be seen as a metaphor for the way nature and technology interact, as the fire engine both represents progress and modernization while also serving to preserve nature and life.

Finally, while much of Williams' work focuses on eco-poetics, his poems also contain a strong element of social criticism. In "The Red Wheelbarrow," for instance, Williams uses the image of the



farmer and his chickens as an analogy for the way people are often taken for granted. In this poem, Williams implies that modern society often overlooks and fails to appreciate the simple things in life, such as nature and the environment, and this serves as a warning against complacency. William Carlos Williams' poetry is an innovative and inventive approach to the notion of eco-poetics. Through his use of explicit imagery and metaphor, Williams is able to communicate his eco-poetic themes and messages through his poetry in a way that is both direct and subtle. His work speaks to the way nature and technology interact and serves as a warning against taking things for granted. By looking at Williams's poems through an ecopoetic lens, one can gain a deeper appreciation of his work. His poems allow the reader to explore the complexity of nature while also reflecting on the healing potential of the natural world.



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الجوانب البيئية لشعر كارلوس ويليامز ورقة بحثية

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المستخلص:

اكتسبت التغيرات المناخية - المتزايدة في جميع أنحاء العالم - مؤخرًا اهتمامًا عالميًا كبيرًا نظرًا لتأثيرها على بيئتنا، وبالتالي على جودة الحياة. يعتني هذا البحث في كيف يمكن للشعر أن يعبر عن ويعزز الوجود المشترك بين الإنسان وكوكب الأرض. ولذلك، يحلل هذا البحث الجوانب الشعرية المتعلقة بالبيئة في أعمال الشاعر الأمريكي ويليام كارلوس ويليامز (١٨٨٣-١٩٦٣). يري الباحث أن الحياة الريفية المثالية كانت حاضرة دائمًا في شعر ويليامز، وبالتالي، يمكن تحليل شعره من حيث المفاهيم الحديثة لما يسمى *Green Poetry* أو *Eco Poetics*. لذلك، يناقش البحث كيف انخرط ويليامز في الشعر المعني بالبيئة بالشكلين الضمني والصريح، وبالتالي، كان أحد الرواد في مجال ما يسمى بـ *Ecopoeisis*. احتفظ شعر ويليامز بالعلاقة بين الشاعر والطبيعة الموجودة في الشعر الرومانسي، لكنه زاد عنها مضيفًا جوانب العلاقة المتبادلة الحتمية ليس فقط بين الشاعر ولكن أيضًا بين الإنسانية والطبيعة. من خلال التحليل النقدي، يوضح هذا البحث كيف تعكس شعرية ويليامز علاقة متبادلة مع الطبيعة على أساس المساواة مع الكائنات الأخرى الحية. بعبارة أخرى، تؤكد شاعرية ويليامز وتقوض أي مفاهيم للتفوق البشري على المخلوقات الأخرى أو الطبيعة نفسها.

الكلمات الإفتتاحية: ويليام كارلوس ويليامز، الشعر البيئي، الشعر الأخضر، الشعر العالمي