

The Poetic Art and Vision of William Carlos Williams: A Brief Note

Dr. V. Shofia

Resource Person,
UGC Remedial Coaching Scheme,
Department of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai – 625021. (T. N). India.

Received June 25, 2016

Accepted July 16, 2016

ABSTRACT

This paper projects any modern literature as some form literature with its roots in the remote past and modern poetry as something of man and his life in this modern world with a focus on the sufferings of modern man and problems of human relationship, particularly on William Carlos Williams's poetry and his real zoom being of modern man and social problems and beautifully examines the poetic and aesthetic way in which William's poetry speaks of man and his sufferings, sharing the sympathy and empathy for making, not only shaping the society but also directing it towards the right path.

Key words: Poetic art and vision.

What is generally held is that any modern literature has its roots in the remote past. Almost all advanced writers of the modern times are said to have got their sources from the bygone days. For instance, James Joyce's "Lepold Bloom" is a modern Odysseys in his **Ulysses**. The whole novel deals with only day of Lepold Bloom, a wandering Jew's life. Joyce's **Ulysses** is a modern epic parallel to Homer's **Odyssey**. The species of 'modernism' emerged from the ideals of romanticism. Modernism has "its beginning in a time of social and political upheaval as the monarchies of Europe crumble during the decade of the First World War" (Sutton, 32). Modernism in literature is a liberal movement being opposed to fundamentalism. One can easily find a humanistic perspective in modern literature. Though a few conventional literatures stand firm in the upheaval's of political and social changes, conventional ideas has lost their values and modernism has become inevitable in literature.

Poetry is considered to be the superior form of modern literature, for the poet's duty is to merge the real and the unreal in a sweetened way. In modern times, poetry must be a short and sharp one without losing its literariness. Modern free verse movement was "a large international revolution that broke the mold of Victorian and academic convention's in all the arts" (P.3). Modern poetry is firmly rooted in the local and national background. T.S. Eliot is one of the

pioneers of modern poetry in English. In **The Waste Land**, Eliot speaks of the modern man's dry mechanical life which is a 'mere waste'. After the success of **The Waste Land**, free verse was recognised as a form in various literatures. In the U.S., the modern poets like Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens and William. Carlos Williams did propagate nationalistic view in their poetry and their main interest was on mankind and their poems were of ordinary men and their life in nature. "Their intensity is based on a common apprehension of human life in nature" (Cromic, 112)

Generally speaking, modern poetry is of man and his life in this modern world. The sufferings of man and problems of human relationship are beautifully expressed in modern poetry. The modern revolutionary movement in poetry has chosen Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams as the champions of modern aesthetic views. William Carlos Williams visualises the actual world and the social problems through characters in his poems. His real zoom is of men and social problems. Born in 1883 at Rutherford, New Jersey, Williams was graduated in 1906 from the University of Pennsylvania. Until his seventies, he has been a fulltime physician. During his leisure hours, he wrote a good number of poems, prose works and plays. He has to his credit publication of 1. **The Tempers** (1913), 2. **A Book of Poems** (1917), 3. **Al Que Quiere** (1917), 4. **Kore in Hell:**

Improvisations 5. Sour Grapes: A Book of Poems (1920), 6. **Paterson** (1958), In 1963, he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Gold Medal for poetry of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Most of William's poems are full of images. In the words of Randall Jarrell, "Williams found his own sort of imagism considerably harder to modify" (P. XI). Later Williams realised that imagism alone is not a poem and so changed the mode of his writing. He became more humanistic and the American students were attracted by the humanistic views of his poems. His poems do deal with man "including hostility to religion" (Cromic. 148) In his poems, Williams rejects and confines only to America. He stands only within the national boundaries. Many of his poems contain personal notes. McCormic says:

"The careful construction of the illusion of spontaneity, the personal note, by turns formal colloquial and stangy the indignation and the sense of a voice in our ear are a gauge of Williams' intensity a feeling for the country and a good instruction to his poetry as a well" (P.150)

In his revolutionary attitude, Whitman seems to have influenced him, as Keats has influenced his romantic values. Many of his poems speak of man and his sufferings, sharing the sympathy and empathy for mankind. Williams' views on social problems, politics, men, sex, female, principles, nature and so on come under the ideas of his humanistic perspective. To Williams, man is the only major subject for art. To him, Art for Art's sake is "an unintelligible statement, and art for the greater glory of God is unthinkable as all modes of formalized worship and religion are unthinkable; only for man's sake must art exist..." (Ostram, 5) only through art, men may realize their potential humanity as individuals and members of the society. From the beginning, Williams is concerned with human feelings and values. In his "The Wanderer: A Rocco study", Williams speaks of the modern metropolitan life:

"With the great towers of Manhattan before me out at the prow with the sea wind blowing. I had been wearying many

questions which she had put on to try me: How shall I be a mirror to this modernity" (P.3)

He is neither ready to mingle with the corrupted modern world nor reflect it in his poetry. He feels that it is inevitable to change the vigorously growing corruptions. 'The Passic' is the recurring symbol in Williams' poems and it symbolizes the corruptions found in the common life. The youth of the society are forcefully spoiled by the already spoilt older generation to satisfy the needs of the corrupted part of the society. The poetry obvious wants to lead a life apart from **Paterson** which is in epic style. Williams strongly believes that he can approach universality only with the local materials available however degraded and low they may be. 'Pastoral' projects this actual world:

"I walk back streets Admiring the houses of the very poor: roof out of line with sides the yards cluttered with old Chicken wire, ashes, furniture gone wrong; the fences and outhouses built of barrel-starves"

This poem is not a mere fact of poverty but it shows the things as they are. Williams rather humorously indicates the sufferings of common man. It is a "wryly plaintative" comment upon the conventional ideals of his society, with Williams looking with wondering love at all the unlikely beauties of the poor" (Jarrell XI). The toil and turmoil of ordinary man in the hands of power and authority is beautifully elucidated by Williams. The social degraders in the high society and their inhuman act against the poor fellow beings are seen in William's poem "In Chain":

"When blackguards and murderers under cover of their offices accuse the world of those villainies which they themselves invent to torture us" (CLP. 19)

The person who condemns the vices in the society commits the same against his own people and tortures then by his power and authority, which can not be escaped easily from this "unless/we learn from that to avoid". Williams opines that one should not do the same against them, to retaliate instead one should learn to love and change them. In the words of Randall Jarrell, "Williams has a

real and unusual dislike of distrust in Authority” (XIII)

The characters in William’s poems are sympathetic and emphatic sketches but remain natural in their environment. Williams loves blames and despairingly yells at his characters. He handles the theme of “urbanization” with tremendous social concern. His views are centered around the “small-community”. A suburban home town left an everlasting remark in his poems. His liberalism is based on the “Unitarianism” and on his multi-national origin. Williams conceives Jesus as a “socialistic figure” and he says in his Autobiography:

“Christ was divine by the spirit that was in him and not by miraculous birth. This seemed democratic and to the point. I believed it. I was impressed to by the slogan: onward and upward forever, which the Unitarians promulgated” (P.22).

This idea only kindles him to write the poem “Choral: The Pink Church”. Here Williams uses the Church as an image for the impression of an individual Williams has not respect for the old people and his poem “The Old Man” shows his sympathy for age old people, bows his head in shame for “those who malign” the old men. Having great respect for the age old people, he explains to the reader how the old man have to be respected. They have taken precedence over the

“Young men and even over dark faced husbands whose minds are a street with are-lights” (CE, 158).

The species of old men have are present in the past, present and future and it speaks of man’s eternity. As an urban man, Williams shows his softness towards the town people in a few poems like the ‘Tract’ and the ‘Riposte’. Opens demonstrates his preference in **All Que Quiere**. ‘Tract’ is a poem of a local funeral procession. It is a public ritual charged with “social signification”. The mourners in the funeral procession are to get the judgement of the rest of the society. Williams plays are important role in shaping the social values amongst his “townspeople”. He could train his eyes to read social problems of America from his townspeople, their dress, behaviour, intellect

and by their individual personality. These poems are the vignettes of downtown life in America. “I will teacher you my townspeople” declares the poet and teaches them love in ‘Riposte’:

“Love is like water or the air my townspeople it cleanness, and dissipates evil gases It is like poetry too and for the same reason” (CEP, 156)

This poem is a microcosm of William’s whole humanistic perspective. Love curses all problems as poetry which can dissolve all impunities in human kind. His “townspeople” represent the whole humanity. The need for love among men and a need of common language to express love are the core subject of his poems like **Paterson** **The Desert Music Journey to Love** and **Pictures from Brueghel**. William’s earlier perspective had been broadened by the interrelation of love, nature and art in his life; later it turned to be a virtue of his poems. He sees life as an embodiment of truth, it is more than labortary experiments. In “The Gift”, Williams writes:

“All men by the nature give praise. It is all they can do. The very devils by their flight give prise what is death; beside this? Nothing” (P.62)

Williams fears that war after war will ruin the whole humanity. He wants himself to be a man of antagonistic world. To him, killing one another is not the end of the problems of society or of the world. One can attain or achieve anything by love; in solving human problems no other power is greater than love. Williams holds an almost mystical reverence for the principle the energy for men’s creative sense. Williams says further in his Autobiography:

“Men have the direction to my life and Women have always supplied the energy”. (P.55)

Though Williams advocated feminism at his earlier period, he attempts to show his various responses to women. For example, in **Paterson**, he writes as:

“Say I am the locus Where two women meet One from the back woods a touch of the savage and of T.B. (a scar on the thigh) the

other-wanting from on old culture and offer the same dish different ways” (P.110)

Williams mythicized the women characters in his later poems. In “Of Asphodel”, Williams asserts:

“All women are not Helen I know that but have Helen in their hearts”. (P.159)

In his Opinion, all woman are not Helen of Troy in their physical beauty; but by their mental beauty, by their emotions and feelings all women have a Helen in them. To transcend the limits of his own male consciousness, Williams attempts the wide range of female characters in his poems. He himself accepts this in his interview to Edith Heal:

“Women remained an enigma; no two had the same interest for me; they were all different. I was consequently interested in too many of them and trying to find out about them all” (64)

Apart from humanity, nature interests him very much. Sometimes he compares the living beings to the static ones as see in “The Horse”:

“He has eyes like a woman and turns. Them about, throws his nostrils like fumes from exhausts of a car” (89)

The interesting thing in this poem is not the physical comparison of a horse to a women or the consciousness of a horse to the twin exhausts of the car. In terms of nature, Williams reversed the familiar conventional order, though he brings the unique qualities of a horse. “Not only does he make the nature of the horse clear, but he established a partial order (Structure) of supposedly unlike things that helps to evidence the underlying unity of the world” (Ostram, 45). Williams brings man also in unity with nature one such poems is “The trees”:

“There were never satyrs never maenads never eagle-headed gods – These were men from whose hands sprung love bursting the wood” (67)

In the form of trees, Williams speaks of men and their actions. This poem is not of satyrs, the God of the woods or Maenads, God of wine or any eagle-headed gods but it is of man, ordinary human

beings and their life in the natural surroundings. Throughout this poem “The Trees”, the poet identifies man with nature. Nature is the subject for him to bring forth his humanistic perspective. One can feel Williams agony in the poem “The Flowers Alone”: This poem talks about flowers and trees once he enjoyed. Though Williams seems to be a total town man, he as a poet, cannot forget the havoc produced in nature by the rapid urbanisation. His agony is suggestive of his concern about environment pollution which has become an acute contemporary global problem.

To conclude, Williams identifies himself as a recorder and critic of the modern society in which he lived and has presented himself as a spokesman of the modern life with rich human perspectives. Through his imagery, he has looked at the human life and human beings. With the same type of social vision. On thematic level, Williams is said to have crossed his own national boundaries, marching towards the universal human principles and his poems were written not for any idealization but to shape the society and direct it towards the right path.

References

1. Angoff, Charles. Ed. **William Carlos Williams**, London: Associated University Press, 1974.
2. Engels, John. Ed. **The Merrill Studies in Paterson**, Ohio: Merril Publishing Co., 1971.
3. Hoffman, Daniel, “Poetry: After Modernism” **Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing**, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 979.
4. Jarrell, Randall, “Introduction”, **Selected Poems**, New York: New Directions Books, 1969.
5. Mc.Cormic, John. **American Literature 1919-1932: A Comparative History**, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
6. Ostram, Alan, **The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams**, Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.
7. Sutton, Walter, **American Free Verse: The Modern Revolution in Poetry**, New York: New Directions Books, 1973.
8. Williams, William Carlos, **The Autobiography**, New York: New Directions Books, 1967.
9. Williams, William Carlos, **The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams**, New York: New Directions Books, 1963.