UNIT 32 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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32.0 OBJECTIVES
After reading this unit you will be able to:
- Write about William Carlos Williams’ life, work and style.
- Discuss Williams’ ‘Spring and All’, ‘A Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ and ‘The Dead Baby’ in detail
- Understand ‘Spring and All’ and ‘A Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ as two poems that treat the motif of spring differently.
- Understand ‘A Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ and ‘The Dead Baby’ as two poems that treat death and its effects on the people around.

32.1 INTRODUCTION
In this unit, you will be introduced to William Carlos Williams’ life, works and his influences briefly. A note on Imagism will inform you of the basic ideas of imagism as a literary and artistic movement and how Williams himself is an exemplary of the same.

The poem ‘Spring and All’ will show how the speaker uses specific images to develop one single image of the arrival and spread of spring after winter. The idea of transition is central to the reading here.
On the other hand, ‘A Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ shows the contrast in the season around the speaker and her own emotions and feelings. The juxtaposition of two start ideas will be explored in this section.

Finally, ‘The Dead Baby’ will explore how the family of a baby awaits the arrival of the body of their child and how the mother and the father react differently to this event. The difficulty of coming to terms with the death of newborn child for causes unknown will be central to the ideas in this poem.

We hope you enjoy reading the unit.

### 32.2 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, in 1883. A doctor by profession, Williams was serious about his medical career, while at the same time making immense contribution to the scene of avant-garde poetry. Born to a British father and a Puerto Rican mother, Williams was always someone who celebrated his mixed ancestry. At the age of 19, Williams entered the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine in Philadelphia. While at medical school, Williams met and befriended both Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle. Pound played a crucial role in the development of Williams’ career as a poet.

He married Florence who was instrumental in sending some of his poems to *Poetry*, the Chicago magazine managed by Pound. Pound was impressed by the growth of Williams as a poet that he arranged for the publication of Williams *The Tempers* in 1913. His second book *Spring and All* contains several of his anthologized poems. On reading his most famous ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ Robert Warren and Cleanth Brooks remarked: “reading this poem is like peering at an ordinary object through a pin prick in a piece of cardboard. The fact that the tiny hole arbitrarily frames the object endows it with an exciting freshness that seems to hover on the verge of revelation.”

Williams was always known to be an innovator and experiments with his poetry. Most of his contemporaries including Pound were expatriates, but Williams remained in America, treating the patients of the Rutherford working class for most of his life. His verse is deeply influenced by his environment, both professional and otherwise. In joining the company of Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, Williams went on to become an integral part of the Imagist Movement in poetry.

#### 32.2.1 A Note on Imagism

Imagism was literary movement of the early twentieth century that initiated the ideas of literary Modernism. Imagist poetry is characterised by a ‘direct treatment of the thing’ without any ornate rendering of the idea. It favoured precision over description and thus encouraged the use of precise images. Pound described an image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”. In the March 1913 issue of Poetry, Pound, along with an essay on Imagism, Pound penned “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” which included:

- Direct treatment of the “thing”, whether subjective or objective
- To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- To compose in a rhythm that reflects the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of metronome (fixed, regular rhythm).
This movement influenced most of Williams’ work. His treatment of images in the poem to be discussed in this unit should invite close attention to understand how his images work towards reading something like a still-life painting of sorts.

Self-check Exercise I
1) What is imagism?

2) What do Cleanth Brooks and Robert Warren say about Williams’ poetry?

32.3 SPRING AND ALL

32.3.1 Introduction

In this section we shall take a close look at how the speaker in Williams’ ‘Spring and All’ characterises the spring in the midst of a fading winter. As you read pay attention to the manner in which Williams uses images in the poem and the visual effect it creates that connects it to the larger theme of the poem, which is that change and transition are the only constants.

32.3.2 Text

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-
William Carlos Williams

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

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Identify the visual images in this poem

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2) Do you think you end up with one visual made of several objects at the end of the poem? If so, how?

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32.3.3 Analysis

‘Spring and All’ is a classic poem by Williams from a collection by the same title. The poem is made up of several simple images that culminate in one image that stands sharply and quite brightly. The poem chronicles the transition period between the end of winter and the birth of Spring. It shows how the birth of life in Spring is not sudden but a process whose beauty is in the very aspect of growth and change inherent to the season. Written in 1921, the poem is also metaphorical of the near end of the World War I and the birth of a new moment in history.

On reading the poem, one can easily visualize the speaker having stopped by a hospital treating contagious diseases, to savour the landscape characterised by
The cold wind and the clouds sailing above in the sky. The contrast between the hospital (which stands for death, due to the nature of the contagious disease) and the birth of spring (which stands for new life) is indeed a sharp one. Yet another contrast is between the closed nature of the hospital and the openness that characterises the environment outside. The seasonal change described here is not a complete transformation from one to another, but remnants of Winter still persist, through which Spring makes its presence felt, quite slowly. The line “sluggish/dazed spring approaches” makes this image quite evident. Spring is not arriving with full of vigour and life, but quite dazed; its pace is sluggish, too. With the movement of time, each of these new things will begin to take better shape and defined outlines, almost as if waking from a deep slumber and straightening themselves.

The speaker sets the scene for the reader quite quickly enabling the reader to imagine a space just by the road close to the hospital. However, the reader is more likely to predict that the rest of the narrative is to chronicle the ‘contagiousness’ of the hospital. In fact, the word ‘contagious’ captures the whole mood of the poem quite aptly. What is indeed contagious the spread of spring in the landscape, although not at the moment when the speaker is looking around the space. While one might expect the disease to spread into the roads, a contrasting image is brought to the fore: that of clouds and blowing wind. However, notice how the cloud is not sailing but are surged by the wind. The opening lines therefore do not set a happy, cheerful and colourful setting, but a bleak one with a contagious hospital and clouds in the sky surged by the winds.

On looking downward, the speaker notices how the plants have dried, the leaves have fallen on the ground. These are, as the speaker suggests, a waste of dried weeds and trees are merely standing tall with nearly no leaves. In the stanza beginning with the lines “All along the road…” the speaker portrays how the landscape is characterised by a lack of life and vigour. However, with the lines “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish/dazed spring approaches”, the poem shifts from a scene of lifelessness to the birth of new life.

The speaker notices the arrival of the season of new life, the first sign of life is seen the personified birth of the new leaves. This slow process begins to speed up. The use of the word ‘quicken’ to qualify the spring that was referred to as ‘sluggish’ and ‘dazed’ is to be carefully noted here. However, it is only a beginning. The new life is only peeping out but not yet fully overpowering the scene. The lines “Now the grass, tomorrow/the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf/One by one objects are defined” make this idea clear. The change is happening in their roots, underground and they are slowly beginning to awake.

The poem can be read simply as a metaphor for change, transition and perhaps even the birth of a revolutionary idea, thought or moment in history.

### 32.3.4 Comprehension Questions

1) How does the speaker chronicle the birth of spring?

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2) Examine the use of contrasts by Williams to bring the central image of the poem.

32.4 A WIDOW’S LAMENT OF IN SPRINGTIME

32.4.1 Introduction

Yet another poem placed in the springtime, the speaker here is not one who observes the birth of spring but a widow who no longer can associate herself with the beauty that spring brings with it.

32.4.2 Text

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before, but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.
Thirty-five years
I lived with my husband.
The plum tree is white today
with masses of flowers.
Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red,
but the grief in my heart
is stronger than they,
for though they were my joy
formerly, today I notice them
and turn away forgetting.
Today my son told me
that in the meadows,
at the edge of the heavy woods
in the distance, he saw
trees of white flowers.
I feel that I would like
to go there
and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.
32.4.3 Discussion

The tone of the poem here is established by the very opening word of the poem. This poem, too, like “Spring and All” uses several contrasts to establish the mood and tone of the poem. The speaker here is a widow who is grieving the loss of her husband and describing her sad state of mind. The title of the poem itself gives this idea. She recognises that the spring is a time of new growth, quite like the speaker in the previous poem. However, the difference lies in how the widow here is noticing how the same season of growth and life means something very different post her husband’s passing. While the season is characterised by several bright colours, the speaker notices how her feeling of grief is stronger than the colours that she no longer takes any joy in them. The title itself makes the contrast in the poem evident. The widow’s lament in springtime is cold, painful and morose. Thus the very renewal of spring has death built into its frame.

The poem opens with the lines “Sorrow is my own yard...” The metaphor here describes how she does not just feel the sorrow. It has now become so vast that it is indeed her yard. She sees the absent presence of her husband in her yard and metaphorically remarks that the yard no longer represents any life for her, but mere grief, sorrow and death. She notices the birth of new grass, which until now was filled with potential for growth and life, is characterised by a cold fire. The paradox here adds to the emotions felt by the widow. She remarks how, with the death of her husband, she feels the sorrow engulfing her completely and making her numb to the growth of life and vigour around her this time around.

Having lived for thirty-five years with her husband, the speaker is unable to fathom an existence without him. Hence, everything around her looks depressing despite the brightness in colour and light. Even though the plum tree is filled with flowers and the cherry blossoms brighten up other bushes, the speaker cannot relate to this new birth of life because of the death of her husband. It is this contrast that is brought out throughout the poem. She remarks that “the grief in my heart/ is stronger than they”. She also maintains that these were precisely the tiny little joys of her family that no longer excite her. One could easily imagine the husband and wife, perhaps enjoying their morning tea in the yard talking about the plums and cherry blossoms. Today, she’d rather forget those memories as they do not bring her happiness but only accentuate her grief.

She remarks that her son’s mention of the meadows with white flowers are where she would like to be, not to enjoy the landscape but to sink into the marsh land quite like the flowers that wither from those trees.

A closer look at the images in the poem shows how Williams treats contrasts and paradoxes effectively to be able to bring out the mood of the speaker in opposition to the surroundings. The use of white flowers against the red plums is an image that one cannot miss. The contrast is one that adds beauty to the image and makes the presence of both the colours felt. Similarly, the use of yellow and red also brings out the bright and light contrast of the flowers very clearly. However, this brightness of the flowers does not appeal to the speaker any longer as she has already mentioned how her whole yard has transformed itself into a space of sorrow. Despite the fact that her son is still with her, the tone of the poem suggests that the widow feels lonely in her yard, showing how she feels isolated in the outside world.
32.4.4 Comprehension Questions

1) How is the representation of spring different in both the poems discussed above?

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2) What ideas of spring are contrasted in “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”?

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3) Examine the contrasting images and the effect it produces to the tone of the poem in “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”.

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32.5 THE DEAD BABY

32.5.1 Introduction

“The Dead Baby” is yet another poem that deals with the theme of death. Quite like “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime”, the speaker in this poem characterises the mind of the family facing the death of their son. A parallel reading of Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” would prove to be useful in understanding two American poets’ treatment death by both the mother and father differently.

32.5.2 Text

Sweep the house
under the feet of the curious
holiday seekers—
sweep under the table and the bed
the baby is dead—
32.5.3 Discussion

“The Dead Baby” is not so much about the dead baby but the effect the baby’s passing has had on the parents. The poem begins with an assertion to “sweep the house clean” for all the guests who have arrived to grieve the little child’s death as well as the arrival of the dead body of the child too. The speaker is neither the mother nor the father of the child, but perhaps a relative, a close friend. This speaker observes a stark difference in the way both the mother and the father deal with their loss. The speaker’s description of the mother’s grief helps us visualize a deeply grieving mother sitting by the window, reminiscing the memories of her child. The lines “The mother’s eye’s where she sits/ by the window, unconsoled—/ have purple bags under them . . .” show that the mother deals with her loss emotionally. The father, however, is more practical and knows that things have to go on, including making arrangements for the arrival of the mourners. He is, in our speaker’s eyes, “tall, wellspoken, pitiful / and abler of the two”.

But what exactly does the act of sweeping signify? Especially under the bed and under the table? The speaker here wants to sweep not just the house clean, but of the reminders of death itself. A symbolic way of moving on from the loss is described through a mindless act of sweeping. What makes the loss all the more difficult to fathom is that the baby has died without any complications, suggested by the word “unproblematically”. The parents merely have a set of facts to comprehend their child’s sudden death. Just like how the medical discourse sweeps the death of the child “by force of the facts”, the parents are also expected to sweep the house of any markers that remind them of the lack of causality in the child’s death. This only goes on to show how both the parents are in denial of their loss in the face of harsh reality and the terrors of life. The very act of sweeping shows how the event has affected the parents emotionally, although the father may not express it overtly.
Now that you have been given some ideas about the poem, reflect on the following questions.

### 32.5.4 Comprehension Questions

1) Reflect on how the theme of death is treated in “A Widow’s Lament” and “The Dead Baby”?

2) In both “A Widow’s Lament” as well as “The Dead Baby”, the dead subject is not within the narrative of the poem but lies outside it. What do you think is the reason for this?

3) What is the significance of the constant reference to the action of sweeping in the poem?

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### 32.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have introduced you to one of the key figures of Modernist American Literature, William Carlos Williams. Here, we have examined how in all three poems, Williams uses situations, places and people that are realistic and that all of us find easy to relate to. Through this, you must be able to read and understand how Williams uses many images towards working towards establishing one single image that speaks like a painting.
32.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

1) An artistic and literary movement that developed in Europe and America, modelled on the art movements in Europe at the time. Several key figures including Pound and H.D. contributed to strengthening this movement both through their poetry as well as critical reflections.

2) They both reflect on how Williams’ ‘Red Wheel Barrow’ is like looking at an object through a small pin prick on a cardboard.

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Look at those images that stir the sense of sight: the hospital, the surroundings, the sky, the landscape and the traces of spring in the midst of a fading winter.

2) Yes, all the images together set up the image of a fading winter and the birth of spring that brings with it freshness and life.

Self-check Exercise 3

1) Spring not as a sudden season that brings with it new life, but a slow and sleepy season that slowly picks up speed to change the face of the landscape.

2) Winter-spring; hospital-landscape outside; sluggishness- quickens

Self-check Exercise 4

1) “Spring and All” chronicles the birth of spring in the eyes of the speaker; “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime” shows how the speaker is unable to associate with the mood of the season due to her husband’s death.

2) Spring as a season of life; here represents death for the speaker.

3) Bright colours on the trees and the lack of life and cheerful emotions in the speaker; spring as engulfing a cold feeling in a season of brightness and warmth.

Self-check Exercise 5

1) Both poems look at death of a family member; denial in both the poems as far as accepting death of the loved one is concerned; death as life-altering.

2) Both poems look at the effect the death has had on the immediate family and not much to the dead person itself; shows what the dead person meant for both the family members.

3) Sweeping as cleaning the reminders of death, escapism and therefore denial of death itself.