

A Brief Analysis of the Phenomenon of Empathy in William Carlos Williams

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Abstract:

William Carlos Williams was a twentieth-century American modernist poet and a central figure in post-war American poetry. His poems present things directly as they are, using straightforward skill with an intriguing ambiguity that is revealed only when the reader resonates with it. The poetry achieves such an effect, greatly influenced by empathy. Williams projected his emotions outwardly onto objects, endowing them with emotions, thus achieving a realm where feeling and setting are happily blended, and the identity of the matter and the self is explored. This paper will specifically analyze the phenomenon of empathy in Williams's poetry from three perspectives: writing technique, choice of imagery, and aesthetic process, and explore the reasons for the recurrence of aesthetic empathy in his poetry. The aim is to address the inadequacies of current scholarly research on Williams's poetry and to expand the discussion of the phenomenon of empathy within it. In terms of writing technique, Williams employs aesthetic empathy by using straightforward text, suitable phonetics, strong color contrasts, and unique line breaks. In terms of imagery, Williams's poems are rich in imagery, encompassing all five senses and various types of empathy. Regarding the aesthetic process, Williams's poems are highly romanticized and emphasize the expression of subjective personal feelings. Through analysis, this paper finds that Williams's poetry embodies the phenomenon of aesthetic empathy throughout, setting off a wave of innovation in modern American poetry.

Keywords: Williams; poetry; empathy; emotional projection.

1. Introduction

Williams's poetry is rooted in life yet transcends it. Through descriptive observation of objects, infused

with his own imagination and creativity, he articulates experiences and emotions drawn from the mundane aspects of life and the sparse routines of daily existence, using poetry to reestablish the connection

between humans and the world. Emotions and consciousness subtly permeate his poems, evoking the reader's own experiences and feelings about the subjects depicted. In his attention to external objects, Williams actively infuses them with his emotions, endowing the imagery in his poetry with sentiments, thoughts, and emotions, which he then aesthetically appreciates, generating aesthetic responses. Concurrently, Williams links aesthetic appreciation to visual perception, achieving unity of matter and self.

Influenced by the social backdrop and literary currents, his poetry is replete with elements of empathy. Numerous scholars have delved into the study of William Carlos Williams's poetry from various perspectives, extending into the realms of impressionism and symbolism. However, there remains a paucity of research that connects his poetry to empathy. A study that links Williams's poetry to empathy is essential, as it can enhance understanding and appreciation of his work. This paper concentrates on the phenomenon of empathy in Williams's poetry, grounded in a practical review of his poetic concepts and a synthesis of scholarly discourse on the subject. Select poems from different periods, including 'Young Sycamore', 'The Red Wheelbarrow', and 'The Great Figure', are analyzed to demonstrate the pervasiveness of empathy in his work. It is anticipated that this study will fill gaps in current research and offer new perspectives and rich material for future scholars to gain a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of Williams's poetry.

2. William Carlos Williams, his Poetry and Empathy

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was a 20th-century American modernist poet and a central figure in post-war American poetry. Believing that poetry must emerge from the ivory tower and reconnect with reality, he consistently adhered to the artistic path of the Native American spirit and cultivated the field of localized and everyday poetry for decades. Williams inherited and developed the concepts of Imagism and Objectivism, and his poetic style was characterized by clarity and liveliness, with unnecessary words omitted to better present the appearance of things themselves. His famous line "No ideas but in things" in the long poem "Paterson" succinctly conveys the core mission of poetry as he envisioned it [1]. His innovations in American poetry influenced poets such as Lowell and Ginsberg, and he is regarded as the originator of American post-modern poetry, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1963. Among the many representative poems, this paper selects a few that are the most typical

and reflective of empathy for analysis, such as "Young Sycamore", "The Red Wheelbarrow", "The Great Figure", and others.

It is generally believed that empathy originated under the influence of Western Romanticism, which takes the phenomenon of empathy in literary and aesthetic activities as a starting point to discuss how humans "extend themselves to external nature through imagination and emotion" and in this regard, it is "intrinsically linked to the ideas of pantheism and the unity of man and nature" [2]. Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), a German psychologist and aesthetician, advocated the use of empathy to explain aesthetic phenomena. He posited that the essence of aesthetic activity lies in the subject's empathy, that the value of beauty is an objectified sense of self-worth, and that empathy is the fundamental premise of aesthetic appreciation. Empathy involves the subject actively projecting their own emotions onto the objective object, as if it possesses certain feelings, thoughts, and emotions, leading to aesthetic appreciation and resulting in aesthetic effect [3]. The root of the sense of beauty is found in subjective emotions, rather than the aesthetic object itself. Aesthetic empathy is a pure, unconscious aesthetic perception, caused by the subject's direct perception of the sensual object and the subject's special psychological activity tendency, which is instinctive and characterized by sensuality and non-utilitarianism. Empathy endows inanimate objects with human emotions and aesthetic qualities, integrating emotions, will, beauty, imagination, and other complex cognitive components. This strengthens the reader's aesthetic experience, leading to empathy. Williams's poetry is greatly influenced by empathy; he projects his emotions onto external objects, endowing them with emotion and achieving a state where feeling and setting are harmoniously blended, and the identity of Matter and Self is realized, thus linking his poetry closely with aesthetic empathy.

3. Empathy in Williams' Poetry Writing Techniques

Williams's poetry eschews metaphorical observation, opting for straightforwardness and reliance on everyday, plain language. It opposes rhetorical excess and obscurity, reflecting the poetic concept that "No ideas but in things" [1], which aligns with the aesthetic of empathy, projecting human emotions and will into inanimate, unthinking objects. This concept and the projection of human emotions and will into lifeless, thoughtless things are conspiratorial. For example, in his work "Young Sycamore", Williams adopts a bottom-up perspective to convey admiration and

praise for the tenacity of a small tree. From the roots to the trunk, and finally to the top with its cocoon-shaped seeds and curved branches, the upward perspective of observation allows readers to feel the tree's stubborn growth and reach for higher ground, embodying a kind of linear tension. The tree's life cycle is then described, contrasting the sparseness of aging branches and leaves with the seeds on the branches, further highlighting the tree's tenacity. Although the small tree is lifeless, the tenacity is Williams' subjective projection. With plain words, Williams uses aesthetic empathy to imbue the tree, which is not emotionally perceptive, with emotion and humanity.

Williams also focused on the phonetics of language. For example, in his masterpiece "The Red Wheelbarrow", a fresh scene of life is depicted. The poem returns to life, reflecting an interest in the commonplace and trivial scenes. It is short and concise, with rhythms that are quite elaborate, reflecting Williams's emphasis on rhyme. There is only one punctuation mark in the entire poem, with each sentence split into four stanzas. Each stanza is divided into two lines, all composed of three words and one word appearing on separate lines, creating a staggered, falling rhythm that is unique and gives the reader a sense of novelty. This kind of lineation allows the poem to fully play the role of each word, emphasizing the independence of each word rather than just its dependence on the sentence. Each word points to a clearer and clearer image, capturing and recording the corner of the farmyard after the rain more directly, conveying the most direct and personal feelings to the reader. The line breaks are Williams's innovation in the modernist aesthetic of poetry. Each division of the lines shifts the perspective, aiding in the outward expression of emotion. Williams follows the most natural way of human expression to create natural lines, continuing the natural way humans look at things: first at the colors, then at the forms, then creating connections between things, and then creating imagination. Step by step, he tells readers how the process of human empathy is like. For example, in "The Red Wheelbarrow", "a red wheelbarrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens" [4], each line break represents a shift in perspective.

Williams, well-versed in painting, applied the compositional techniques and color schemes of painting to poetry for aesthetic empathy. His poem "The Great Figure" depicts a rainy night when a fire engine is seen speeding past, and Williams is impressed by the sudden glimpse of the golden number five. The contrast of colors is particularly striking, with the large golden number five contrasting with the red fire engine. The two distinct shades of red and gold appear in the dark city composed of rain and dim lights, creating a strong visual impact. The striking number five, which suddenly breaks through everything

to appear in the hazy, rainy night, creates a chaotic, noisy, and nerve-racking atmosphere. Williams projects his own feelings of tension and oppression, his personal sensory and intuitive perception, through the contrast of colors, into the poem, providing the reader with a unique emotional experience.

4. Empathy in Williams' Poetry Imagery Choices

Imagery is the result of empathy, a subjective or objective image obtained by the aesthetic subject during aesthetic activities [5]. Writers are influenced by things in the process of creation, generate emotions, and on this basis, project their specific emotions into the object, achieving unity between the object and the self, thus producing imagery. Imagery is categorized into visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory, and kinesthetic imagery. Williams' poetry encompasses all five senses, incorporating various forms of imagery.

Taking "To a Poor Old Woman" as an example, the poem depicts a poor old woman eating plums on the street. Visual imagery is present in the description of the street, the older woman, and the plums—elements that are commonly seen in everyday street scenes, creating the most ordinary of settings. The scene is depicted in such a plain and natural manner that it allows the reader to easily immerse themselves in it through the use of local materials and casual descriptions. Kinesthetic imagery is evident in the older woman's slow and savoring consumption of the plums. "The way she gives herself to the one half sucked out in her hand" [6], the sour plum is treated as a treasure by the old woman, turning it into a delicacy. In just a few simple lines, it prompts the reader to think. The older woman and others of the lower class are often hungry, and the plums, despite their sourness, can satisfy their hunger. This poem allows one to empathize with the hardships of the lower class. The image of the sour plums not only represents the older woman's food but also serves as a metaphor for the sourness of her life. The recurring phrase "They taste good to her" is an example of gustatory imagery. The repetition of this phrase, "They taste good to her", is not just about taste but also a commentary on the bleakness of the old woman's life. How could plums be so delicious when they are sour? It is because plums are one of the few foods available to the older woman. For her, having plums to eat is a blessing. The repeated emphasis on "They taste good to her" deepens the gustatory imagery of the poem, resonating with the reader on a deeper level. Auditory and olfactory imagery are reflected in other poems. Consider "The Red Wheelbarrow". The wheelbar-

row, glistening in a corner of the farmyard after the rain, evokes the sound of raindrops falling on it. The imagery that follows is of white chicks, and by imagining this scene, one can almost hear the chicks clucking by the wheelbarrow. The olfactory imagery is conjured when the reader envisions the entire poem and naturally perceives the smell of the grass after the rain, as well as the scent of rust on the wheelbarrow as the raindrops fall. These are the olfactory images that the author forms for the reader with the two elements of ,rain water‘ and ,wheelbarrow‘. In summary, Williams‘ poetry is rich in imagery, and the selection and use of imagery reflect empathy.

5. Empathy in Williams‘ Poetry Aesthetic Process

Williams‘ poetry is replete with romanticism, pursuing the collaboration between the ,viewer‘ and the ,viewed‘, and emphasizing ,perceptual reality‘ over ,conceptual reality‘. Aesthetic empathy also focuses on the union of the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object, concentrating on the communication of perception.

The collaboration between the ,viewer‘ and the ,viewed‘ represents the empathy between imagery expression and subject-object perception. Williams‘ impressionist poetry creation clearly distinguishes between the “viewer” and the “observed”. Impressionist poetry often observes life from this perspective, with the poet placing himself within the content and backdrop of the poem. As the “viewer”, he bears the responsibility of guiding people to understand the real world, while also being the “observed”. His emotions and consciousness are progressively presented in the creation as the poem unfolds, allowing readers to gradually form their views on his emotional fluctuations and gain new insights [7]. Take, for example, his poem ,Between Walls‘, ,the back wings/of the/hospital where/nothing/will grow lie/cinders/in which shine/the broken/pieces of a green/bottle‘ [8]. He employed the preposition “of” and the article “the” to construct the space between the “walls”, increasing the tension of the poetry and highlighting the significance of this neglected place; the coal slag pile and green bottle create a stark contrast in color and form, providing readers with a visual impact; the capitalization of prepositions and nouns in the poem‘ s title enhances the three-dimensional sense of the poem, further metaphorically referring to the area between the walls as “wings” and stimulating readers‘ associations; the quantifier “pieces” emphasizes each individual shard of glass, but the use of “where” and “in which” combines each individual element to form a complete ecological environment [9]. Williams depicted the environmental crisis through the

portrayal of urban pollutants, expressing a sense of urban emotion and consciousness.

Williams contended that consciousness must be consciousness within things. He believed that the ,sensibility‘ of poetry is the foundation of poetry rooted in the real material world, and that poets should observe things as they are in themselves, rather than through their own cognitive experience. ,Ideas only reside in things‘ is his significant poetic theory [1]. He innovated in the language form—inheriting and developing the writing concepts of Imagism and Objectivism, launching a thorough reflection on traditional poetics, and striving to rebuild the relationship between humans and the world through poetry. Williams advocated for the promotion of things and the suppression of concepts, and attempted to strip poetry of the power of reason, making it an intuitive or improvised expression of fleeting emotions and consciousness and seeing the world from a different perspective, thus initiating a wave of poetic innovation.

6. Reasons for the Recurrence of Empathy in Williams‘ Poetry

At this time when world wars were ongoing, traditional values and aesthetics were being deconstructed. Western philosophy had entered its fourth philosophical crisis, following the crises of Greek natural philosophy, Roman ethical philosophy, and scholastic philosophy [10]. Society was obsessed with profit, and Williams advocated for the everydayness of poetry, endeavoring to rebuild the relationship between humans and the world with poetry, striving to present things as they are in their own right in a better way. „No ideas but in things“ is the core mission of his poetry [1]. Such a social backdrop creates such a creative intention, and the theory of aesthetic empathy is undoubtedly the best choice to showcase his creative intention.

In the mid-19th century, with the rise of experimental aesthetics, which was created by Fechner‘ s application of experimental psychology in aesthetic research, ,empathy‘, an ancient aesthetic phenomenon, became the focus of many aestheticians‘ disputes [2]. At one time, the shift in the focus of Western aesthetics from objective theory to subjective theory, from ontology to aesthetic experience, emphasized the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic experience. This literary trend influenced Williams, and in his creative work, he repeatedly employed aesthetic empathy. Williams gradually developed his own poetic style in constant competition with the continental poetic trend advocated by Pound and Eliot, and his poems were greatly influenced by them. Pound‘ s theory of poetic imagery em-

phasized the combination of meaning and image, of inner thought and emotion with outer image and form. Eliot believed that poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion [11], and advocated the use of art to deal with and express emotion. All these factors contributed to Williams's preference for and reliance on aesthetic empathy.

In summary, various reasons such as the social backdrop, literary trends, Williams's own creative intention, and creative experience make aesthetic empathy a recurring theme in his poems.

7. Conclusion

The line of poetry emphasized by William Carlos Williams advocates writing poems on American subjects using American English and dialects, thereby highlighting the indigenous nature of American poetry. With innovation as his mission, he depicts more scenes of daily life, pointing out the inaccuracy of disconnecting poetry from real life. Advocating a return to reality, he uses life's ubiquitous scenes, employing imagination and creativity to project emotions through his poetry, which is simple and plain as a picture. Aesthetic empathy, a universal psychological phenomenon in literary creation, is a fundamental principle of aesthetics. The aesthetic subject projects their consciousness and emotions into the aesthetic object, achieving unity between the object and emotion. This makes literary works more infectious, conveying the author's thoughts and resonating with readers, exerting a significant influence on Western modernist literature. Under the influence of literary trends and social background, Williams' creative intentions and experiences are closely related to aesthetic empathy, and he skillfully applies this aesthetic principle to his own poetry, which embodies aesthetic empathy to a large extent from any perspective. The use of aesthetic empathy in his poetry has brought about significant innovation to the American poetry scene and has had a substantial impact on the development of modern American poetry and popular culture, introducing a fresh and powerful colloquial style to American poetry and contributing to its localized development. This paper adopts a new perspective to interpret Williams's poetry,

enriching the theoretical system in this field and opening up a new path of thinking for subsequent research. However, the paper currently lacks an in-depth and comprehensive study on the importance and status of aesthetic empathy theory. Based on this limitation, future research will further delve into Williams' poetry and Western literary theory to explore and understand this field more comprehensively and in-depth.

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