

**“We sit hunched together brooding/our fate”: Reading Some of Williams’s Poems through the Sartrean Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is a Modern American poet. We find despair, meaninglessness in some of his poems as he was perturbed by the aftermaths of two World Wars. Even when plunged in deep existential angst and trauma, Williams expresses his feelings with an obvious Romantic trait. Williams seems to conform to the Sartrean concepts of the subjective self, despair, humanism, choice, and action etc. The paper will attempt to trace how the speakers of some of his poems suffer from indecision, but ultimately have to take a decision anyway. The paper will also try to address how Williams grapples with despair and ultimately shows a vista towards optimism. A few poems of Williams have been selected to showcase Williams’s affiliation to Sartre. One by one, this paper will try to analyze the poems from Sartre’s vis-à-vis Existential perspective.*

**Key words:** despair, angst, Existential, Sartrean, humanism, choice, optimism)

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is a Modern American poet who belongs to American Modernist period (roughly from 1920 to 1960). The readers find despair, meaninglessness in some of his poems as he was perturbed by the aftermaths of two World Wars. This paper is going to look into how Williams was highly influenced by Sartre’s Existential and philosophical ideas. It is also going to see how the speakers of some of his poems suffer from indecision, but ultimately have to take a decision anyway.

The current age is said to be an age of absurdity. In the dictionary, the word ‘absurd’ is defined as “completely ridiculous; not logical and sensible” (Hornby 5). Unfortunately, one need not depend on a dictionary to pinpoint the strife between the way one desires the world to appear and the harsh truth of human existence. Every day one confronts warnings that life is a bundle of contradictions and uncertainty; often the approaches to life that made logical sense even a few years ago no longer seem rationally valid in a fast-paced and changing society. Even after that man has to make a choice nonetheless: “Man is

condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre 29).

The fact that life is absurd creates the need for rebellion in an effort to create meaning where no meanings previously seemed to exist. Creating a new meaning is more vital for the Existentialists than ever following the devastating events of the Second World War (1939-45). Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence and the conditions of this existence rather than postulating a human essence, stressing that the human essence is determined through the choices we make through our life. What these conditions are, is better deciphered in the light of the meaning of the term “existence”, which originates from the Latin word “*existere*”, meaning “to stand out”. Man exists in a state of distance from the world though physically he remains in the midst of it. This distance is what enables man to project meaning into the world which is callous to human emotions. This projected meaning remains fragile, constantly facing breakdown for any reason — from a tragic incident to a particularly insightful moment. In such a breakdown, one is placed face to face with the naked meaninglessness of the world, and the results can be awful and devastating.

According to Williams’s biographer Paul Mariani, Williams “had watched the age of unlimited progress tumble, the age of optimism to be replaced by what he (Williams) called ‘bizarre derivations’...including suicide as the final economic solution!” (Mariani 300). In some of his poems, he portrays especially the unfortunate ones — the impoverished, old, alienated, deprived, derelict, criminal or ill — and he makes the reader sympathize with their situation and feelings. But unlike his contemporaries, Williams never mourns the loss of the gods or the decline of Western civilization. In spite of depicting sordid things at times, Williams, however, remains an optimist. Whereas Eliot in his poetry depicts the exhausted resources of the modern individual, for Williams, beauty is always available— here and now.

A few poems of Williams have been selected for the present paper to showcase Williams’s affiliation to Sartre. Now one by one, this paper will try to analyze the poems from Sartre’s vis-à-vis Existential perspective. Taken from the collection, *Al Que Quiere* (Lat., “*To Him Who Wants It*”, 1917), Williams’s poem “Libertad! Igualdad! Fraternidad!” (Spanish for “Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!”) shows that sometimes dreams fail to be true and perhaps that is why one fails at reaching one’s goals. It is to be kept in mind in this connection that the motto “liberty, equality, fraternity” found its origins in the French Revolution (1789). The very title of the poem upholds the democratic ideal which is one of the features of Transcendentalism. The lines: “You sullen pig of a man/ you force me into the mud/ with your stinking ash-cart!” (*CP-I*, p. 77) open one’s eyes because it reflects what can happen to anyone. There is a possibility that the man who is on the cart has come from a higher rank in society and has lost it all. Here the readers find a man complaining to the man who practically carries him around on the ash-cart. The speaker gets stuck in a dream in which he thinks he has wealth or is better than the man carrying the ash-cart. The poet thinks that “it is dreams that have destroyed us” (*CP-I*, p. 77).

The narrator of the poem also asserts that “dreams are not a bad thing” after having said before that “all things turn bitter in the end”. It confuses the readers but perhaps he seems to suggest that we should not stop striving to achieve more in life. He seems to drive the point home that one must have a reason to be alive, just as Sisyphus does in rolling the stone along the steep hill. Here in this poem the Sartrean concept of despair seems to be used: “With despair, true optimism begins: the optimism of the man who expects nothing, who knows he has no rights and nothing coming to him, who rejoices in counting on himself alone and in acting alone for the good of all” (Sartre 159).

Towards the end of the poem, the readers find the fate to be common to all: “We sit hunched together brooding/our fate” (CP-I, p. 77). Through this line, it could be said that the Existentialist concept of Humanism was on the back of Williams’s mind. Because it sheds light on the human individual’s pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressures of mass society to conform. ‘They’, i.e. the people in the poem are waiting for their fate which is probably going to be the same for all. So, it has been found that personal experience and acting on one’s own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth. A human being is not born complete in every sense — one has to find out who and what one is by one’s action.

Existentially it is quite possible to live inauthentic lives based on what, for example, Sartre calls ‘*mauvaise foi*’ — bad faith or to remain inactive by showing lame excuses. Human identity is a recurrent act of self-creation and self-projection into an open future. Choice and decision are major existential categories which determine what one will become. The Humanism that Sartre endorses in his book *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) has its emphasis on the dignity of human beings. This idea moves away from the traditional theocentric universe and supports an androcentric universe. It also accentuates the supremacy of human choice for the creation of all values:

In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations; in other words, they define him negatively, not positively.” (Sartre 37-8)

Sartre’s Existentialism also captures the optimism usually associated with Humanism. Sartre reminds us that human beings are not isolated individuals but rather members of communities and of the larger human race. There may not be a universal human *nature*, but there is certainly a shared human *condition*. All human beings are in this together. All live in human society, and all are all faced with the same sorts of decisions.

“Apology” (taken from *Al Que Quiere*, 1917) is Williams’s another poem that closely relates to the poem “Libertad! Igualdad! Fraternidad!”. This poem describes the working-

class citizens in America. His ideology can relate to the thoughts of the working-class immigrants. This poem describes from his point of view what these people look like and it goes like this:

colored women  
day workers—  
old and experienced—  
returning home at dusk  
in cast off clothing  
faces like  
old Florentine oak. (*CP-I*, p. 70)

Here Williams seems to be influenced by the Sartre's concept of Humanism the focus of which is on the human individual's pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressures of mass society for conformism. This has a lot to do with the 'American Dream' because an immigrant to the United States has to work hard until he/she has enough money to get the things he/she always wanted in life. When he speaks of the black women, old and experienced day workers, the utterance underscores how immigrants have to work a lot under duress. When workers reach a certain age, they grow tired and they have to keep on working because the American Dream is not a cheap dream. Another reason is that as they are immigrants, they have to keep on working ceaselessly because pension plans or social security schemes/benefits do not apply to them. Williams, like Sartre, seems to criticize social inequality between working class and the capitalists. Sartre's central concerns in the postwar period were group struggle, oppression, and the nature of history. As a follower of Marxism, Sartre believed that societies were best understood as arenas of struggle between powerful and powerless groups.

Taken from the collection *Al Que Quiere* (1917), the poem "Danse Russe" (meaning 'Russian Dance') begins by creating a very clear personal illustration. One of the issues of the poem is alienation which is one of the premises of Existentialism. The narrator feels alienated from other human beings in his own house. With these lacunae, Williams embraces the fate he has been given, and prepares himself to go on with the life he has chosen, which has been an inevitable choice, to be precise, a dignified and respected one. Camus posits through his novel *The Outsider* (1942) that the perception of the absurd and the seeming absence of values lead to an alienation of man from the mankind and the outside world. The reader finds the narrator in Williams's poem to be self-absorbed like Meursault. Much of his work is a continual song of himself as one finds in the case of Whitman as well. When the narrator dances naked, the sun is described as a 'flame-white disc in silken mists' above the shining trees. The narrator almost resorts to arrogant narcissism in lines such as: "If I admire my arms, my face,/my shoulders, flanks, buttocks/ against the yellow drawn shades," (*CP-I*, p. 87). Soone also finds here the sensory description to be very much potent.

Sartre's concept of "Existence preceding essence" may also be relevant in reading this poem. What one is (one's essence) is the result of one's choices (one's existence) rather than the reverse. What this means is that human beings have no predetermined nature that defines anything at all about them. Rather one has been flung into existence and out of that existence, one eventually creates one's identity by his/her choices and actions: "Man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself" (Sartre 22). This means that one arrives in this world as a conscious being, but one's worth is defined only by what one does to make it worthy. One has the atheistic freedom to choose which value system to follow in one's life. In the poem "Dance Russe" (1917), the standing of the narrator before the mirror is not considered at all dignified; it is a drastic step away from the socially acceptable male behaviour, especially for a father. But here the narrator wants to create his essence from amidst the domestic atmosphere: "Who shall say I am not/ the happy genius of my household?" (CP-I, p. 87). Standing before the mirror, Williams questions the image of traditional manhood. To Williams, the role of perception is important for creating reality and underlining the inseparability of essence and being in the Existentialist terms.

In the poem "The Desolate Field" (from the anthology *Sour Grapes*, 1921), the persona sees the sky as vast and grey and it is a vast image of all men. The poet finds his head in the air but cannot remember his identity: "My head is in the air/ but who am I.?" (CP-I, p. 150). So here we find the identity crisis of the narrator. In Sartre's novel *The Nausea* (1938), the protagonist Roquentin also feels the same kind of confusion about the importance of existence: "... I toss between the houses, I am, I exist, I think therefore I toss, I am, existence is a fallen man, won't fall, will fall, the finger scratches at the window, existence is an imperfection" (Sartre 147). The persona's groping for identity produces despair and anguish, but in the midst of one's "metaphysical sickness" one will face a "crisis", a crisis which reason and /or rationality cannot dissolve. He seeks answers, to become complete again, yet wherever he turns he discovers himself as marooned with nowhere to go. Ultimately it takes the reader away from a sense of despair and brings the reader up to a new light, to a sense of hope: "And amazed my heart leaps/ at the thought of love/ vast and grey/ yearning silently over me" (CP-I, p. 150).

Williams's poem "Death the Barber" (from *Spring and All*- XIV, 1923) is a dramatic monologue narrated by the barber who, because of his job, regularly witnesses people from every walk of life. His life is fully charged with profound experiences of the stories related to death. So the persona refers to the idea of man's continuous death every night as if he has been influenced by John Donne's poem "Holy Sonnet 6" (1609) where he compares Death with a short sleep: "From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow" (Gardner 85). Without giving in to death, Williams here affirms the concept of regeneration:

...we die  
every night

And of  
 the newest ways  
 to grow  
 hair on  
 bald death— (CP-I, pp. 212-3)

According to Existentialism, we all are fundamentally time-bound beings. Unlike measurable, ‘clock’ time, actually lived time is qualitative. Williams here gives emphasis on the ‘moment’: It’s just/a moment/he said, we die/every night—” (CP-I, p. 212). Here the self of the narrator is not filled with nihilism but it retains energy and passion: “the newest ways/to grow/hair on/bald death—” (CP-I, p. 213). It is a kind of regeneration out of waste materials. For Sartre, the nothingness of the Self is the basis for the will to take action. Sartre opines that “In a word, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself” (Sartre 157).

Williams’s description of the ‘moment’ has special significance in literature in diverse forms. In Modernism, that fleeting and delicate moment was termed an “epiphany” by James Joyce in the abortive draft version of his first novel, published posthumously as *Stephen Hero* (1944). Walter Pater also celebrates the moment, expressed most memorably in the “Conclusion” to his book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873):

[...] some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, -for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. (Pater 188)

There are similarities between Joyce’s idea of “epiphany” (“a sudden spiritual manifestation”) and Wordsworth’s expression “spots of time” (as evoked in Book XI of *The Prelude*). In giving importance to a particular moment in “The Red Wheelbarrow” (from *Spring and All*, 1923), Williams comes close to the Existential concept “Time is of the essence”. The ‘lived’ time when he perceives the red wheelbarrow is qualitative. It practically takes him back to a significant point in time as he continues to stare at the object and makes an analogy with life and the sources of life.

In the poem, “Perpetuum Mobile: The City” (from the anthology *Adam & Eve and The City*, 1936), the narrator invites the readers to acknowledge the fact that “we live/looking—” as “there is no end / to desire—” (CP-I, p. 432) and that the only choice, therefore is to “break / through / and go there—” (CP-I, p. 432). So here the narrator takes an Existentialist stance, as making a choice is imminent in Existential terms. Here the narrator tries to discover beauty out of the waste materials:

Over the swamps  
 a wild

magnolia bud—  
 greenish  
 white  
 a northern  
 flower— (CP-I, p. 431)

Williams thinks that it is dream that propels human beings. It is suggested that one should not stop striving to achieve more in life and have a reason to be alive, just as Sisyphus does in rolling the stone along the steep hill. In this poem too, we find mention of ‘dream’ multiple times: “—a dream/we dreamed/each/separately...” (CP-I, p. 430); “a dream/toward which/we love—” (CP-I, p. 431). Action is a vital thing in the above poem. For Sartre, as he asserts in his philosophical book *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), action is immensely important as we cannot imagine reality without action: “Reality exists only in action...Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (Sartre 37).

The poem “The Descent” (from *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, 1954) is a poem about ageing and the radiance and agility of youth evaporating from the human mind and body. The narrator describes the ‘descent’, or the ageing process, as being made up of despairs. By ‘descent’ he seems to mean a descent into memory, a descent into his own inner depths, wherein he finds solace for the increasingly disturbing mental and physical state. The narrator reaches a point at which the external world no longer seems to provide an adequate correlative for his desires and expectations. His only recourse is to turn inward, as Wordsworth does through his poetry, in search of contentment which the outward world apparently denies.

Although the ageing process is not particularly soothing to Williams, he is able to harp on the positive aspects of life, a new realization, which enables him to drown out the despair of ageing and appreciate the rewarding renewal that the descent produces over time: “For what we cannot accomplish, what/ Is denied to love/ What we have lost in the anticipation—/A descent follows/ Endless and indestructible” (CP-II, p. 246). He elsewhere says, “Memory is a kind/ of accomplishment” (CP-II, p. 246). So, Williams finds ways of looking at defeat and loss that enables him to see negative experiences as positive ones— a kind of “accomplishment”. Thus, the truth of this prophetic observation is simultaneously revealed and reasserted. In Sartrean terms, despair is a truly human condition. As one finds in the poem that despair comes to be a reversal of despair through a new awakening, it can be said that it should not be treated as totally negative. The readers find in the poem that by focusing on the positive aspects, despair can be alleviated.

In the poem “The Desert Music” (from *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, 1954), Williams celebrates his ability to translate unconscious, unspoken experience into the dance of language. The almost unbelieving proclamation: “I am a poet! I/ am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed” (CP-II, p. 284) near the end of the poem indicates his child-like

exultance at this rediscovery in old age. It also comes closer to the Existential belief “Existence precedes essence”: “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (Sartre 22). After reading the poem, it is found that subjective reflection (“I am a poet! I/ am”) is an inseparable part of the poem. The primacy of the ‘subjective self’ finds expression in Sartre. In Sartre’s novel *The Nausea* (1938), one finds that the protagonist Roquentin begins writing the diary in order to record the subtle changes he has noticed in his perceptions of himself vis-à-vis the world around him. He is perturbed by his own strong consciousness and uncertainty about the significance of his life, and he seeks the meaning of the existence of people and objects in the world.

So, in the poems discussed above, the readers find a kind of hope in spite of the echo of the Existentialist ideas. It has been found that Williams’s depiction of despair has some resemblances with the Sartrean concept of despair which is the feeling arising out of the callousness or obstinacy of the aspects of the world that are beyond our grips. Williams comes close to Sartre’s concept of despair in poems like “Libertad! Igualdad! Fraternidad” and “The Descent”. It has also been found that Williams conforms to Sartre’s concept of Humanism in poems like “Libertad! Igualdad! Fraternidad” and “Apology” in which the narrators assert that they are not secluded individuals but rather members of communities and of the larger human race. Williams also seems to conform to the Sartrean concept of the subjective self in poems like “Death the Barber”, “The Desert Music”, and “The Desolate Field”. The poems like “Perpetuum Mobile: The City” come close to Sartre’s concept of choice and action. The poem “Dance Russe” seems to follow Sartre’s concept of “Existence preceding essence”.

Through the discussion of the above-mentioned poems, it has been noticed that Williams’s poetry captures the beauty the world provides for us. The persona’s groping for identity produces despair and anguish. In the midst of one’s “metaphysical sickness” one faces a “*crisis*”—a crisis which reason and rationality cannot help us to tide over. Williams seems to support the Existentialist idea of the inadequacy of reason to understand certain things. The narrators in those poems are enthused to move on in the recalcitrant world. Williams is also able to serve, and share it with all its immaculateness through his poetry. Thus, letting the readers feel with all their five senses and also imaginatively respond, his poetry celebrates those possibilities of love, brotherhood, and hope.

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