

Images of Old Age with its Sufferings in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams

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Abstract

The present study is about the thematic concerns of old age in the poetry of William Carlos Williams (September 1883-March 1963), a leading poet of America in twentieth century. He deserves the place beside Pound, Eliot, Frost and Stevens. He is the winner of many awards. He was a doctor by profession, because of his profession he saw various stages of life very closely. His poems are richly concerned with the last stage of life i.e. old age. This medico-poet regards this age as the age of ripeness, maturity and full of experience. This stage of life is like a leaky vessel on a dark ocean. It gave the idea of life that, it is cumbersome and full of sufferings, half-vanquished, floating painfully in the ocean of manifold physical and psychological bewilderments. This stage of life is the evening of life, full of various types of sufferings and pains, but the people of this age, with their wisdom know how to deal with the problems. There are lots of things to be learnt by young people from their old counterparts. Being a doctor it was certain that he has to deal with people at the various stages of life. He not only saw the old age in human beings but also in the world of nature.

One of the leading poets of America in twentieth century, William Carlos Williams, was born in Rutherford, New Jersey in September 17, 1883. After medical training at the University of Pennsylvania, he spent the rest of his life, until his retirement in 1951, practicing medicine in Rutherford. He met Ezra Pound, his life-long friend, at the University of Pennsylvania, and later came to know Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Louis Zukofsky, and other poets and artists. In his busy life Williams published several books-poems, plays, stories, novels, essays, a book about American History and an autobiography. The complete body of his published poetry, may be read in four volumes: "The Collected Earlier Poems", "The Collected Later Poems", "Paterson" and "Picture from Brueghel".

Though Williams' works received a considerable attention during his life-time. He gradually came to the recognition as a leading poet of twentieth century, one deserving place beside Pound, Eliot, Frost and Stevens. He is the Winner of "Dial, Award (1926) for his service to American Literature, the "National Book Award for

Poetry" (1949), the "Award of the Academy of American Poets" (1957) and many others.

His profession as a doctor never came in his way of writing. In this context Ford Madox Ford writes, "Dr. Williams is an admirable and abominably over-worked physician from the state of New Jersey. I hope that his publicity... get him struck off the medical register so that he may produce many thousand fewer babies, and many, many thousand more clear, caustic words. He has been writing for many years, and the product of his hours between deliveries has long since drawn to him the consciousness at once of the intelligentsia and the writers of his country across the Atlantic.... He is in short, adored among his patients as a physician and among writers as a writer" (Doyle, 146-47). Both as a writer and as a physician he has served for more than sixty years.

Williams rebels against the assumptions of romanticism. Like Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, Williams was anti-symbolic in much of his early poetry so he is regarded as a realistic poet. His works are the unique versions of the new tradition, which can only be discovered by the immersion in any part of his work. Williams has chosen the themes of his poetry from the real and common life situations. Being a doctor it was obvious for him to deal with the diseased people at various stages of life. He not only saw the old age among human beings, but in nature also.

Nature is the supreme ruler of the whole universe and the law of nature is, change, so every living being who has taken birth in this mortal world, have to follow this rule of nature. Life, from birth to death gradually keeps on changing. In this context William Shakespeare has rightly said in his play, "As You Like It" that "All the World is a stage", where living beings come and play the various roles according to their age. Old age is the advanced stage of life before death. This stage of life is the autumn of life which is full of ripeness, maturity and fullness, but still the fear of this senile age and death engulfs the people at this stage. Old age is the time when people have nostalgia for their past. They remember their childhood, full of innocence. These people really love to be in the company of little children. As Williams' mother in her old age speaks without self-consciousness, "I think the older I get the more I enjoy little children. They are like little birds, jumping around that way. They are so light and springy you know" (Doyle, 326).

These mature and experienced old people consider their young counterparts, immature and inexperienced as is seen in the poem, "The Last Words of My English Grandmother",

oh you think you're smart
 you young people,
 she said, but I'll tell you
 you don't know anything. (CEP, 444)

The old lady regards them inexperienced when they try to lift her by force, which cause inconvenience and pain to her because of old age inflicted with weakness and diseases. No doubt that she regards young people inexperienced but this same age is the preparation for old age as Robert Browning in his poem "Rabi Ben Ezra" speaks that old age is the consummation of human life, and the period of youth is but a preparation for it. Old age is an inevitable physiological process and certain to come. Williams in his poem, "From Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": CODA, admits the inseparability of old age, he says,

"Inseparable from the fire
 its light
 takes precedence over it.
 ...
 spring has come in
 or a deep snow fallen
 call it old age. (Meserole, 3382)

Old age, the evening of life, is as inseparable from living beings as light from the fire and it is as sure to come as spring season after deep snow-fall. Williams has defined the old age in the poem, "To Waken an Old Lady" (CEP, 200) as the, "Old age is/a flight of small/cheeping birds/skimming/bare trees/above the snow glaze./Gaining and failing". Poet here says that old age is the age of merriment and happiness so old people must not brood over their sweet or bitter past, they should enjoy their life without any anxiety or worry. W.B. Yeats has quite contrary views as compared to Williams. Yeats says about this particular stage of life and the people of this age, in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium", "An aged man is but a paltry thing./A tattered coat upon a stick,"...

This medico-poet perceived the old age not only in human beings but also in botanical and zoological world. The old age in botanical world with its sufferings is brought about mainly by seasonal effects. A substantial part of botanical suffering has been perceived with the imagery of winter season, the cruellest season which mars the whole vegetation with its dark, dreary and cold invasions. The plants and trees experience severe and monstrous onslaughts of the winter winds. In the poem "The Crimson Cyclamen" Williams speaks about the old leaves, he says, "Under the leaf, the same/though the smooth green/ is gone". (CEP, 399). "smooth green/is gone" is the symbol of transientness of youth. In another poem, "Another Year" (CLP, 56) he praises the world of old bushes and avoids their comparison with

"conflicting/seasons" and says, "The slender quietness of the old/bushes/ is of a virtue all its own". In one another poem "St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils" Williams speaks about the harmony among plants, flowers and trees who are, "Side by side young and old/take the sun together-/maples, green and red/yellowbells..." (CEP, 379-80). In, "The Sloughing Wind" poet says that the old age remain with living beings till their death, "Some leaves hang late, some fall/before the first frost-so goes/the tale of winter branches and old bones" (CEP, 205). In this stanza the poet has humanized the tree that is why he says, "so goes/the tale of winter branches and old bones." Sufferings in old age are indicated here in comparison with leaves before and after the frost. In another poem, "The Catholic Bells" poet has compared the grapes with the broken teeth of an old man, "the grapes till hanging to/the vine.../... like broken/teeth in the head of an/old man"... (CEP, 112). Williams has described the season of winter in nature as the season of old age, with its sufferings, which ultimately leads to death. The sufferings of the old trees are brought out by the dark and dreary effects of the winter season. Leaves of the trees turn pale (old) and fall, the trees become bare and dry. They look like skeleton. In number of his poems, Williams describes winter as the cruellest season giving despair, disappointment and dulling of senses, even the creative faculties of human mind seems to be suspended. Severe onslaught of the winter storms make plants lifeless and flowers get withered. In the, "Approach of Winter" (CEP, 197), the trees are struggling against the cold wind, "The half-stripped trees/struck by a wind together,/bending all,/the leaves flutter drily". The poem "To an Elder Poet" (CEP, 383) is about a flower having, "No flame" which is also the symbol of weakness and exhaustion in old age.

The humanization of the botanical world is one of the striking features of Williams' poetry. In his poem, "A Kenneth Burke's Place" he has humanized the old tree and says, "to the leafless brush.../from old knees/and elbows upon the tree" (CLP, 257) the plant is leafless and old but the flowers are still sprouting out of it, this also, is the symbol of liveliness in old age. In another poem, "St. James' Grove" (CEP, 11) poet has humanized the river. Like a friend, an old lady is talking to the river, alongwith it lamenting for the loss of her youth, the youth which she wants to enjoy again, she says, "River, we are old, you and I, .../ The young soul you long asked of me.../Give me the well-worn spirit.../Stand forth, river, and give me/The old friend of my revels!" In these lines the old woman is hoping against the hope, which is to have her youth again. In this context Roy Harvy Pearce has rightly said, "Upon the Orchidean beauty of the new world the old rushed inevitably to revenge" (Pearce, 113).

Williams writings richly sympathize with human beings. Because of his profession as a physician, he has to deal with the human beings who are suffering with various diseases at different stages of life. But the last stage of life which is, old age, is richly concerned with human beings in his writings. In his poems we come to know about both, the positive and negative aspects of this particular stage of life. Williams himself admits in an interview that life actually starts at this stage of life. "I knew that if I lived long enough I was going to be old, and after I became old, then life really would be, as I've said over and over again. Then I would be retired because I have served. I've done my stuff for society, and what is left is my time" (Wagner, 12) after retirement he wants to live for his-self only, not for anyone else.

In his poem, "Birds and Flowers" (CEP, 355) Williams says that the old people must not care about sufferings, pains and other problems of old age, rather they should enjoy it happily. But in reality the old age has its own fears and problems. It is like a leaky vessel on the dark sea which can perish at any time. The people in this particular age have to face the problems related to vision, hearing, fatigue, loss of appetite, insomnia, difficulty in concentration, loss of interest in life and the loss of ability to enjoy the life etc, it is in Williams' poem, "A Portrait of the Times" (CEP, 92). It is a symbolic poem, in it the "Squint-eyed" woman in her "black/dress" are the symbols of old age with its sufferings. The old woman's clutching of "late chrysanthemums" flower to her bosom symbolizes her love for youth. In the poem "The Descent of Winter" (CEP, 306) poet has humanized the time and highlights the problems of old age. In old age due to "feeble" and "uncertain" senses old people become unable even to comprehend their own body parts. Their senses render them helpless. In old age body is like the ash out of fire. Similarly in the poem, "The Death of Franco of Cologne: His Prophecy of Beethoven" (CEP, 25). The old man (Poet himself) in the poem says that he spurns the views of others about old age with its various problems, when he was young but being an old man, now, he realizes the reality and says, "the spark fails me", "The strife's ended" and "The fire's out" all are the symbols of exhaustion in old age and finally poet accepts that in old age, "Now; I am done; I am at last well broken!"

The people in their old age remember their life's golden period i.e. youth, and hope for it desperately because young can bravely meet or can endure the hardships and dangers of life but the old age is quite contrary to it, weakness, helplessness, exhaustion and senility are the gifts of old age, which render them unable to face the hardships of life. The poem, "All the Fancy Things" (CEP, 321) is about the problem of confusion and loneliness in old age, poet says, "in Puerto Rico in the old Spanish/days when she was a girl/so that now/she doesn't know what to do/with herself alone". She also hopes for her youthful days and thinks that, "Green is

green/but the tag ends". She came to the surface of reality towards the end of poem, that time has gone and she cannot have it again. In the poem "Clarity" (CEP, 4) an old woman is getting ready for worship and painting herself before the poet. Williams here satirize the old woman for her hypocrisy in her old age alongwith her love for jewellery. Poet has compared her with, "A red leaf that falls upon a stone!" Similar is the case with the queen in the poem, "Broadway" (CEP, 5) who has painted and attired herself in such a way that gives her a young look. The queen here uses cosmetics and fit clothes to hide her old age, it shows her love for the youth.

The poem "Apology" (CEP, 131) is about old age, its experience and ugliness compared with "Old Florentine Oak" tree and has called them, "the terrible faces/ of our nonentities". In his poem "Sailing to Byzantium" W.B. Yeats has regarded this age as the age, full of experience and for these fully experienced people Yeats has suggested a new world Byzantium full of peace and love rather than this world of young people, full of sensuous activities and revelries.

The old age is the home of various diseases and problems, as in the poem, "To an Old Jaundiced Woman" (CEP, 268) the old woman in the poem is on her death bed, her present condition is quite critical. Her words, "I can't die/I can't die" shows her love for life but she doesn't know that life is like a flirty beloved who always betrays living beings to death but death on the otherhand is like a true beloved always there to embrace the life's rejected lovers. This poem also expresses the love of old people for life, which is full of various problems and wants. One such example is in the poem, "Time The Hangman" (CEP, 204). In this poem an old man Abner, is brooding over his past and thought that he was once a well stout man, full of vigour but in his old age, says poet, "Now your face is in your hands, and your elbows/are on your knees, and you are silent and broken".

The old age which is already full of sufferings and various other problems, is made more problematic by the neglecting behaviour of their younger counter-parts. As in the poem, "The Old Man" (CEP, 158). Poet has described about the experienced old men "who have studied/every leg show" but now cut from the touch and being neglected by others. They are berefted from everything in their old age. Old people's helplessness in front of the faces of shameless people's who "malign" them is the cause of concern for the poet. For this poet "bow" his head in shame and offers them, "The peaceful beer of impotence."

These poor old people who are sourceless and helpless are unfortunate because poverty aggravates their sufferings and sometimes they have to do the degraded jobs. One such example of poverty-stricken old people is in the poem,

"The Descent of Winter" (CEP, 302) by Williams. The very first line of the poem is quite ironical in which Williams says, "The justice of poverty." The poverty has no effect upon the birds, animals and other things, but the old people are destined to suffer at the hands of poverty. Similarly the poem, "The Poor" (CEP, 415) is about the poverty-stricken old people, who are already in the age of suffering. The old house and its iron balcony are not affected by poverty but an old man have to "sweep the sidewalks-" for his upkeep. For this poet says that it is the "anarchy of poverty". These poverty-stricken old people, who are ignored also by other people, expect money from others to lessen their sufferings as in the poem, "To Greet a Letter-Carrier" (CEP, 432). "why'n't you bring me/a good letter? One with/lots of money in it,/I could make a use of that." These poor people have to beg even, for their upkeep as in the poem, "Franklin Square" (CLP, 67). An old woman is begging in the city of "bounty-." Poet says that an old woman, "pursing her old mouth/ for what coin?" It is ironical that everything is in excess in the city but it is not for the poor old lady rather she has her lot in begging.

The old age is the age nearing death. Williams in his poem, "Morning" (CEP, 394) also says the same by comparing old age with, "-Firewood, all lengths" ready for final destination. No doubt that this is the age nearing death but the people of this age have the precious treasure with them. In the poem, "The Clouds" (CLP, 128) Williams describes about the treasure of old age he says, "It is that which is the brotherhood:/the old life treasured". The old people carry with them the precious treasure of experience and message of "brotherhood" which they distribute to younger generations. Similarly in the poem, "Autumn" (CEP, 408) Williams speaks about an old man who is toiling hard, "on his knees" and "reaps a basket-/full of/matted grasses for/his goat". These lines symbolize that the old man is toiling hard to pave the way for the generations yet to come by cutting the "matted grasses". In another poem, "Dactyls- From Theocritus" IDYL 1: Goatherd, is about "an ancient fisherman" who is casting his net for fishing with his whole power and strength of heart. The old man in the poem is compared with, "a rock,/a ragged rock" with, "the strength/of a young man" (T. Weiss and Renee Weiss, 152-53). The old man's experience, strength, his love and interest in his job with full heart is indicated here.

Williams as a physician has witnessed the various ailments and diseases of old people so he wants that the life of these people must be peaceful without any burden of duties. In their age, which is the home of various ailments and problems, they are unable to bear the burden of responsibilities. Even their knowledge and experience is laughed at by their young counterparts. In the poem, "The Descent of Winter" (CEP, 300) poet speaks about the sufferings of old people and spurns the

very thought of duties for them and says, "what chance have the old?/ There are no duties for them." There should be a truce for old people now because they have done their stuff. The people who have suffered at this stage of life already, never want to come to this stage of life again, because they know the difficult course of this last stage of life. It is in the poem, "A Crystal Maze" (CLP, 167) in which Williams has expressed same feelings, "One avidly sheathing the flesh-/ one denying it. One loosed through/ the gone brain of an old man-".

Williams saw the staleness of art similar to old age. It is in the poem, "Tolstoy" (CLP, 200). The master and artist in the poem have grown old but he does not want to accept the modern style in art. This clinging to the old traditions is as disastrous to his art as, "weevil/ to the cotton-head" and this stale art is "...like stale fish/stinks," and for their excessive adhesion to old traditions poet asks them to, "Commit yourself to Heaven". Similarly in the poem, "The End of the Parade" (CLP, 45) poet speaks about old melodies, now out of tune or fashion. These melodies in the olden times were popular, but with the passage of time and taste, they become old fashioned. But there is beauty of their own kind in old things. Their oldness do not mean that they are out of tune or use, there is still beauty in them, as explained in the, "Principle of Genial Criticism", S.T. Coleridge presents the fine example of this beauty, "An old coach-wheel lies in the coach maker's yard, disfigured with tar and dirt... If I turn my attention from these as regard the figure abstractly still, I might say to my companion, 'there is a beauty in that wheel, and you yourself would not only admit but would feel it, had you never seen a wheel before". (Dembo, 54-55).

The study of the images of the old age with its sufferings in Williams' poetry, take another dimension with reference to the personal elements. Upto now being a physician he had seen, "...the actual calling on people, at all times and under all conditions, the coming to grips with the intimate conditions of their lives" (Williams, 356) in old age. Being a family member and a social-man as well, he saw his relatives and family members suffering in old age and ultimately himself in the same condition. In the poem, "The Last Words of My English Grandmother" (CEP, 443) he speaks with pity for the old woman who was, "wrinkled and nearly blind". She again and again was asking them to, "gimme something to eat", but they were starving her because she was suffering with some critical disease in her old age and ultimately dies in that same condition. In the poem, "An Eternity" Williams recalls an incident of his old and diseased mother and says, "I remember how at eighty-five/you battled through the crisis and/survived!" (CLP, 183). In his another poem "Eve" (CEP, 376) he admits his rude and tyrannical behaviour towards his old mother, whom he after the death of his father, imprisoned in home and thus

aggravated her sufferings in old age. But soon he realizes his misbehavior and asks her to, "Pardon my injuries," and my impatience and curt replies to you.

As far as Williams is concerned, he himself is afraid from old age. In his poem, "The Counter" (CLP, 265) poet expresses his concern about his growing old and has compared himself with the flower and says, "My days are burning" means that the days of his youth are decreasing day by day. The poem "SOOTHSAID" (CEP, 9-10) is about the fear of poet's being an old man, in his thoughts even. The poem is full of description of diseases in old age. Poet's beloved asks him, "Would you behold yourself old, beloved?" Poet was quite clear about the horror and sufferings of old age, about which he does not even want to think, that is why he said, "I was pierced". Like other old people Williams also longs for the golden period of life i.e. youth. He regrets for the loss of youth and says, "if I were young I would try a new alignment-" but soon he comes, "Back into self" or reality i.e. his old age, where it is not possible for him to do something adventurous. Poet again regrets for the loss of his youth in the poem, "Pastoral" (CEP, 121) and admits that, "it was plain to "him in his youth that what to do, but being "older now" he is confused and does not know what to do. Williams was quite concerned about his growing old and he regrets this at his fiftieth birthday on 17 September, 1933. It has been described by poet in the poem, "Detail",

I had a misfortune in September
 ...
 I been keepin' away from that for years.
 ...
 None at all. no feeling. I'm too
 old to have a child. Why I'm fifty. (CEP, 428)

Williams in his autobiography says that, "...the old who believe that to be young is to be princely, A sad deceit is waiting" (Williams, 383) for them in old age. In his poem, "The Gentle Rejoinder" (CLP, 59) poet says that "...I want to/give up my job and join/the old men" whom he once saw fishing. He wants to have some peace and comfort in the company of old people, because at present he is feeling bored with his life. "To Wish Myself Courage" (CEP, 32) a poem by Williams is about his planning for his old age. He plans that, to avoid the problems of old age he will write and sing about the nature's happiness without "the stress of youth." But when this also starts "worn" or bother him again, then he will rise in his "great desire" and will sing the "youth-song" again. This reveals poet's keen desire for youth. Although Williams has rejected this stage of life and does not want to come to this stage of life again which is full of pains and sufferings, but in an interview with Linda Wagner he regards old age as an experienced age, and says, "I think the young man is likely to be carried away by his passion; but the old man, if he is wise, knows"

(Wagner, 61-62) how to remain firm without any inclination to any temptation. This is their experience and wisdom which is the cause of their being firm in critical situations. Williams in his poem, "The Descent of Winter" (CEP, 310) has expressed his contrary views by saying that growing old is not the symbol of experience and maturity. He says that, "Even idiots grow old" means that people who grow old in course of time without any experience and knowledge of life and other things are idiots. They suffer more in their old age because of their inexperience and hypocrisy with it.

Williams has given the message through his poem, "The Deceptrices" (CEP, 426) he says,

Because they are not,
they paint their lips
and dress like whores.
Because they are uncertain,
they put on the bold
looks of experience.
This is their youth, too
soon gone, too soon
the unalterable conclusion.

The message is about the transientness of youth and after it old age is certain to come, so do not be so artificial and proudy about youth.

Williams himself suffered a lot in his old age by repeated heart-strokes and an attack of paralysis. But these sufferings never came in his way of writing, even during the last tortured years of his life he was able to write with boyish zeal. The works of his final decade contains some of his most beautiful writings, as full of life as ever. But there is a confusion that Williams likes old age or not, in this context Charles Doyle says, "Williams is now seventy years old; and the case is- whether he likes it or not (my guess is that he would both like it and not) - he is a saga. For that is what a saga is, a person who keeps growing and producing and nevertheless manages to live along time; as Rilke said, the point is not to be happy but to persist. A saga has got the trick of it; we open our ears and say, tell us" (Doyle, 299) about this trick.

Being a realist he has presented stark and harsh realities of life in his poetry. Can anybody learn these aspects from outside sources? No, this feeling of old age and its sufferings can never be learnt from literary movements and excitements, but it is- because of the events in his life and his keen insight for the feelings of others. In this context again Charles Doyle has rightly said that, "He is perhaps chief of those (like Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore) whom the prospect of old age and the awareness of death as reality have shocked into a new poetic life" (Doyle,

318). Williams died on March 4, 1963 and two months later in May 1963, he was awarded both, 'The Pulitzer Prize' and 'Gold Medal for the Poetry of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.' Williams has declared the old age as the age of ripeness, like autumn season. It is the age of maturity, experience and wisdom which the old people try to share with their younger counterparts, who lacks maturity and experiences of life. His poems are full of riddles and realities of life. He describes how the other things effect the life of old people, with the naked realities of old age along-with the sufferings and pains of life which ultimately leads it to its eternal and destined end. From the present study it can be concluded that, time, with various ups and downs in life, cradles each and everything to its final destination- the Death.

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