

Analysis of William Carlos Williams poem:
“The Last Words of My Grandmother”
And ideas of death and women

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William Carlos Williams, in his later years

William Carlos Williams was an avid poet of the 20th century. Most of Williams' work is centered on his personal life or things that happened in his personal life. Williams was born on September 17, 1883. He attended the University of Pennsylvania where he earned his M.D. and specialized in pediatrics and obstetrics. Williams wrote his poetry from his late teens until his death on March 4, 1963 at the age of 79.

Williams has a large cannon consisting of both prose and poetry writings. He believed that "prose has to do with the fact of an emotion" and "poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form" (volume 1, 219). What Williams is saying here is that in prose you are allowed to show emotion and in poetry that emotion must hide behind different forms.

Williams uses his ideas about what prose and poetry are suppose to exemplify in his work dealing with death. Williams writes many poems and poetry about the death of patients and loved ones. He approaches each person differently and leaving much of his emotion hidden in the poetry and more vivid in the prose.

Williams also writes about women in much of his poetry surrounding death. Williams treats women differently based on their age and his respect toward them. This paper will discuss many poems that Williams wrote about death and the death of women. It will examine the feelings and emotions that each poem has about death and Williams overview of death. The main poem being analyzed in this paper is "The Last Words of My Grandmother" published in 1924.

Last Words of My Grandmother
(First Version)

She stayed over after
the summer people had gone
at her little shack
on the shore, an old woman

impossible to get on with
unless you left her alone
with her things-among them
the young grandson, nineteen

whom she had raised.
He endured her because
he was too lazy to work
too lazy to think and

had a soft spot for her
in his bright heart, also a
moustache, a girl, bed
and board out of the old lady

the sea before him
and a unkulele- The two
had remained on and on
into the cold weather.

Thanksgiving day
after the heavy dinner
at a good neighbor's table
Death touched the old lady

in her head- Home she must
go leaning heavily on the
boy who put her to bed and
gave her what she wanted-

water and Mother Eddy's
Science and Health and
Forgot her for other things.
But she began to rave in the night.

In the morning after frying
an egg for her
he combed his whiskers
picked his pimples

and got busy with
a telegram for help-
Gimme something to eat
Gimme something to eat

I'm starving
they're starving me

was all I got out of
the dazed old woman

There were some dirty plates
and a glass of milk
beside her on a small table
near her stinking bed

Wrinkled and nearly blind
she lay and snored
rousing to cry
with anger in her tones-

They're starving me-
You won't move me
I'm all right- I won't go
to the hospital. No, no, no

Give me something to eat!-
Let me take you
to the hospital, I said,
and after you are well

you can do as you please-
She smiled her old smile:
Yes, you do what you please
first then I can do what I please-

Oh, oh, oh, she cried
as the ambulance me lifted her
to their stretcher on the floor-
Is this what you call

making me comfortable? -
Now her mind was clear
Oh you think you're awfully
smart, you young people,

she said to us, but I'll tell
you you don't know
anything- Then we started.
On the way

We passed a long row
of elms, she looked
a long while out of the
ambulance window and said-

What are all those
fuzzy looking things out there?
Trees? Well, I'm
tired of them.(p253-255)

“The Last Words of My Grandmother” is a poem that Williams wrote about the death of his paternal grandmother, Emily Dickenson Wellcome. According to Kerry Driscoll in William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse, Williams had great admiration for his grandmother especially her passion, independence, and determination. Her life was also a mystery to him because she kept silent about most parts of it.

When analyzing the poem it is important to begin with the title because the poem begins there. “The Last Words of My Grandmother,” by this title I was able to infer that an old lady has died because Williams’ says that it was the last words, implying that she didn’t say any more words than what Williams is about to reveal that she said in this poem.

Williams begins “She stayed over after the summer people had gone,” implying that she was too old and too feeble to move so she had to stay. He goes on to describe the woman “an old woman impossible to get on with unless you left her alone with her things.” By the end of the second stanza Williams, the narrator of the poem has enveloped his relationship with the woman in the poem “among them the young grandson, nineteen whom she had raised.” He also speaks about his relationship with the woman by saying “He endured her because he was too lazy to work too lazy to think and had a soft spot for her in his bright heart.”

He begins talking about the death of the old woman in stanza six. He says, “Thanksgiving day after the heavy dinner at a good neighbor’s table Death touched the old lady.” Here Williams capitalizes the word death, giving it the utmost important meaning in the poem. He also sets the time of year for the woman’s death. Another large theme in much of Williams’ writing is nature. He is constantly writing about the death

and rebirth of nature. It would make sense that Williams would have this woman die in the fall and beginning of winter because all of nature is dying as well.

Williams' then describes the scene of the old woman's bedroom. He says that she was lying unkempt in her "stinking bed." He also describes a small table that was beside the bed that had dirty plates and a glass of milk on it, setting the complete scene.

The old lady herself is then described. Williams' describes her as being "wrinkled and nearly blind" which again implies that she is very old and fragile due to the loss of her eyesight. Williams' also says that the lady was lying in her bed and snored, which I took to mean that she had a difficult time breathing and that she might not actually be snoring. The old lady is also described with flustering anger and crying for food. The lady must be hungry and is too weak to feed herself.

When she says, "They're starving me" it is unknown of who the "they" are. My best guess would be that she is so tired and knows that she is dying and is trying to pass the blame onto someone of why she is wasting away to nothing and is not recognizing the fact that she is actually dying soon, somewhat in denial. The old lady also says that she doesn't want to go to the hospital, which could also be part of the denial of her terminal illness.

The narrator, Williams, says to the lady if he can take her to the hospital. He also plays into the denial ideas of the lady by telling and assuring her that she is well and if she needs to go to the hospital that she is free to go on her own free will, but he is there to help her. The woman was pleased with the comment from the voice in the poem.

In the next part of the poem, the scene of the poem changes. The lady is being taken out of her bed and taken by ambulance. The lady is yelling while the men are lifting

her, this makes me think that the lady has been lying in bed for a long period of time and is stiff and sore, and still reluctant to go even though it is on her own free will.

The lady then shifts back into her old character, the mean lady that was seen in the beginning of the poem. She yells at the narrator of the poem, explaining her unhappiness because she is uncomfortable. She then also gets angry at the world around her. I think she realizes that she is dying and she is upset about it so she finds everything to complain about, "Oh you think you're awfully smart, you young people she said to us, but I'll tell you you don't know anything" including all young people because she doesn't think that anyone young can possibly understand what she is feeling at this time.

The ambulance then started moving and the voice of the poem was in the ambulance with the woman. This makes it obvious that the voice in the poem is someone very close to dying woman, Williams himself.

While the ambulance was moving, the poem doesn't mention any lights or sirens. This makes me think that the woman's condition isn't fixable and there isn't a hurry to get to the hospital. While they are moving, she is looking out of the window, she sees fuzzy things that are actually trees and says that she is tired of them. The old woman dies.

"The Last Words of My Grandmother" is typical of a William Carlos Williams poem. This poem is visual, the setting changes throughout the poem and it paints a clear picture of the old woman character. This poem is also narrative like many of his other poems, telling a story and a personal story. This poem is also captured in the moment, like Williams' likes to do. There is a clear idea in the poem that the story in the poem is happening as the voice in the poem is telling the story. This poem also tells a personal story, which is a typical element in most of Williams' work. Williams' doctor personality

also comes alive in this poem. He is concerned with the care of the old woman and the death of the old woman, some things that he most likely dealt with his entire life both in his adult like practicing medicine and while he was a child watching his father practice medicine. He also describes the dying process in the poem, first the old woman loses her sight, which is the first sense to be lost when dying but it is assumed that she can still hear because that is the last sense to leave. Williams also describes the bereavement process. First the woman is angry in general, then she becomes angry at her health, then she becomes angry at the world, and eventually is willing to accept her death with dignity.

Williams' religious views are also played out in this poem. Many people associate death with finding God in the afterlife, or another religious figure based on their religion. In this poem, Williams is an atheist and says nothing of what the old woman is to expect after death, and there is no kind of last minute glorification, the woman left the physical world with no words of what she will face.

I believe that the most important theme of this poem is that it symbolizes Williams' views on death. He makes death in this poem an everyday event. There isn't a large commotion when the lady dies or when she is dying, if anything the lady is being neglected in the early stages of her death, Williams describes this neglect in the disarray that the lady's room is in when the poem begins. Williams is also responding this way to death because, I assume, that with him being a doctor, seeing death is an almost normal event and this poem shows us Williams' view of what he thinks death is. This might also be an unimportant event in Williams' life because after all the woman dying in the poem is old.

I would think that Williams would have more emotion in the poem assuming that it is his grandmother who is dying. Since Williams had a close relationship with his grandmother, he should be sad upon his death. Like Williams said his poetry holds feelings but in underlying ways. Williams' prose, on the other hand, shows his feelings in his prose writing about his grandmother. He says "SHE was a devil if there ever was one" (274). "All she wanted was to be alone and to have her quiet way," which is Williams way of saying that his grandmother was a person who wanted to keep to herself (275).

We looking for exact criticism about "The Last Words of My Grandmother" and William's views on death, there was little criticism that related directly. I have divided the critics comments into sections below. I find it less confusing to discuss what each critic has said about the poem individually than to intermingle his or her comments.

Kerry Driscoll, William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse

Driscoll's comments were focused on the relationship between Williams and his grandmother. Williams' grandmother's name, his father's mother, was Emily Dickenson Wellcome. Williams had great admiration for his grandmother especially her passion, independence, and determination. His grandmother was also a mystery to him because she kept silent about parts of her life.

Driscoll also stated that Williams was curious about women and was curious about they ways in which they thought and acted. Driscoll doesn't mention "The Last Words of My Grandmother" directly; he does speak a lot about "The Wanderer," which

is another poem about his grandmother, but a more descriptive poem about the physical being of the woman.

Audrey T. Rodgers, Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams.

Much like Driscoll, Rodgers wrote about the women in Williams' poetry. Rodgers said that Williams both loved women and saw them as a challenge and a fulfillment. Williams had two main women in his childhood, his mother and his grandmother. Both of these women took on mythic roles in his poetry.

Rodgers also focuses on the life of Williams' grandmother. Emily Dickenson was born in England in 1837. She was orphaned as a small child and raised by another family. She eventually married Williams, William Carlos Williams' grandfather and bore her first child, Williams' father. Williams' grandfather was soon out of the picture, it is unclear if he ran off or died, but Emily was left to raise a child on her own.

Rodgers also discusses the writing on Williams' and his relationship between imagination, women and poetry. Rodgers affiliates Williams' writing of women with being a doctor and getting to know women on a more intimate basis than most men. Williams liked women so much because they were creative, they created life, children. Williams related to these women, not because he created life, but because he created art, poetry.

Death also appears in some of Williams' poetry. Rodgers believes that death is in his poetry because Williams had to confront death, but it also defeated him as a person.

As a doctor, Williams was constantly helping people and preventing death, he was bringing in new life with the birth of babies. Williams then felt defeated when death occurred because it went against what he was working towards.

I believe with Rodgers when he makes the connections between death and Williams feeling defeated when death occurs around him. Since Williams specialized in pediatrics and obstetrics, he is most often associated with bring life into the world and working with new life, small children. When he is faced with death, he doesn't know what else to feel but defeat.

Bernard Duffey, A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams

Duffy, much like the other critics that I have discussed, discusses the role of Williams' grandmother in his poetry. Duffy says that one of the main reasons that his grandmother is a large part of his poetry is because she personifies the American experience that Williams was striving to capture in his own life. Her life is the ideal American experience because she had a child, her husband left her, and she then immigrated to the West Indies, had another child, and moved to the United States to help raise her son's children.

The ideas of death are also important in Williams' work. Duffy believes that in the poem, "The Last Words of My English Grandmother," the lady accepts the end of her life properly, but at the same time has no grace or dignity in her dying.

Vivienne Koch, William Carlos Williams

Koch discusses “The Last Words of My English Grandmother” directly. He believes that the main theme of this poem is resistant toward death. He also discusses Williams’ realism in his poetry. Williams was able to create an old woman in his poem that is seen as real. Koch believes that he was able to do this because he was able to study people of all ages in his clinical setting and able to attach realism to these people in his poetry.

When analyzing this one poem, one of the largest parts is Williams’ personal touch. He is writing this poem about his grandmother, his father’s mother, Emily Dickenson Wellcome. When I first began analyzing this poem, it wasn’t quite clear to me why he would write a poem about his grandmother’s death with little emotion in it. It is now clear, by looking at criticism that Williams had a close relationship with his grandmother and spent many of his summers and life with her. It is also clear that that the poem why the poem displays little emotion. According to Rodgers in Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams, Williams was in love with women and saw them as a fulfillment and a challenge in his life. Rodgers also said that Williams wanted to unite himself with women because of their ability to create life and make women a personal work of art.

There are also a few more themes that arise in the poem. First, the time of year that the old woman died. Williams says early in the poem that the woman started becoming angry a few days after Thanksgiving, which makes it early winter. By reading a few of Williams’ other poems, he associates death with the seasons. Since everything

dies in the fall and early winter, before new life begins in the spring, it makes sense that this woman would die as life around her was also dying.

I also reanalyzed Williams' medical approach in the poem. Williams describes the signs of death in the poem, with sight being the first sense that people lose and hearing being the last sense. Williams also shows no emotion himself, since this is a family member one would think that there would be some emotion. Williams takes no time to say goodbye to his dying grandmother and views her death on a medical basis that old people die.

Since there is little criticism written on the poem "The Last Words of My Grandmother" and Williams's ideas of death and how he feels about death, I think that it is important to look at a few other places in Williams' work where he deals with the ideas of death and his feelings toward death. I will be looking at the poem "Elena" where Williams writes about his mother's death, I will also look at a few pieces of Williams prose writing "Descent of Winter" and also analyze how Williams' views of death change by looking at the death of small children in his poem "The Dead Baby" and his prose writing "Jean Beicke."

In 1949, Williams wrote a poem about the death of his mother, "Elena." He describes her death as a private death. He also takes time in this poem say goodbye and he describes her death in a few days instead of just one day when describing his grandmother's death.

The mother, Elena, shows many of the same signs upon her death that the grandmother also experiences. His mother gets confused when Williams tells her that she is her son, she forgets that she even had a son. She also loses her sight and can only see

things when they are put right in front of her face. Food is also discussed in the poem, about what she ate, and she did eat like the grandmother but complains that she isn't eating anything.

The theme of seasons and death also arises in this poem. His mother is dying while spring is arriving, around Easter, the end of March. Williams is saying that the old is dead in the winter and spring is coming with new life. Since the mother has no new life in her, she must die in the winter, before spring when new life arises.

I believe in these two poems, many of Williams' themes, which are shown in most of his poetry, are also shown here. He expresses little feeling with both of these poems. This is because of his profession. He sees death not only as part of the life process, but also as defeat. Again because he is a doctor and he is trying to save lives, he feels defeated when someone dies. He also takes an approach that death is a part of the life process. One would expect a son and a grandson to be weeping over the loss of the loved one, but Williams takes their deaths with a professional approach.

Another main theme that emerges is the idea of nature. Williams associates death with winter and life with spring. Both of these women die in the winter, when much of nature dies. In both of these poems, there is only talk about winter and things dying, not of spring and new life beginning.

Williams' views on women are also seen clearly in this poem. He sees women as art, because they create life, which is something he is trying to preserve in his profession. He is inspired by women and also curious about them. He treats both of these women with respect, not only in his life, but also in these poems. He lets their deaths be peaceful, which gives people hope that death is peaceful. Williams speaks of these women as

ideals, letting them accept their deaths gracefully and properly. Like Koch said, Williams is able to attach realism to his poetry.

Another writing of Williams that shows his views of death and especially his views on elderly peoples' death is in "The Descent of Winter." On the date marked 10/21, Williams wrote a two stanza untitled poem. The second stanza of the poem is his doctor view of dying and the onset of death. The stanza is as follows:

What chance have the old?
There are no duties for them
no place where they may sit
their knowledge is laughed at
they cannot see, they cannot hear.
A small bundle on the shoulders
weighs them down
one hand is put back under it
to hold it steady
Their feet hurt, they are weak
they should not have to suffer
as younger people must and do
there should be a truce for them

In this writing, Williams begins by asking the readers how the old are to survive since they have little place in life, by not having any duties or knowledge and they have also lost their sight and hearing. When he says that the elderly have a small bundle on their shoulders, I believe he is talking about death but one person is holding them up, a doctor. He then says that they shouldn't have to suffer anymore because they have no more to give to their lives and there must be a truce for them. Since the word truce is usually used in war terms, I believe Williams is again portraying his views toward death. Williams would only say that the elderly would face death like a war if he were fighting for something. Williams is fighting for life and against death in this poem much like his other work because he sees death as a defeat.

Also in "The Descent of Winter," Williams writes about the death of another woman;

We must listen. Before
she died she told them-
I always like to be well dressed
I wanted to look nice-

So she asked them to dress
her well. They curled her hair. . .

Now she fought
She didn't want to go
She didn't want to!

When Williams is describing the death of this woman, he does so much like he described the death of his grandmother. There is little and no emotion in the poem and no talk of dying. The woman in the poem is more concerned with what she is going to be wearing and looking like when she dies. The woman is also fighting death at the end of the poem much like the grandmother does. I believe this again to be Williams' personal views about death and how death is attacking someone he knows and he feels as though it is again a personal defeat for him as a doctor.

In two other poems, Williams is describing the death of small children. In both of the poetry and prose writing below, Williams shows more emotion than he did in describing the death of old women.

The Dead Baby

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

The mother's eyes where she sits

by the window, unconsolated-
have purple bags under them
the father-
tall, wellspoken, pitiful
is the abler of these two-

Sweep the house clean
here is one who has gone up
(though problematically)
to heaven, blindly
by force of the facts-
a clean sweep
is one way of expressing it-

Hurry up! any minute
they will be bringing it
from the hospital-
a white model of our lives
a curiosity
surrounded by fresh flowers (page 268)

“The Dead Baby” is a poem about two parents grieving over the loss of their child. This poem also represents William’s views about death, especially the death of a small child. The poem consists four stanzas.

The first stanza begins with “sweep the house”. Williams is not saying literally that the parents are sweeping the house, but sweeping away their grief and emotions. The second stanza describes the mother and the father and their particular emotions. The mother is too full of grief and is just sitting and staring out the window. The father is described as the stronger of the two, but still full of pity because of the loss of his child.

Williams’ views of this death are expressed in stanza three, when he says that the baby has gone to heaven, “though problematically.” What I believe Williams is saying is that it is problematic that the child went to heaven since Williams doesn’t believe in heaven. He is also saying that there is hope because we all hope that children, after their death, go to a better place, like the Christian heaven.

Williams also expresses this death as a “clean sweep.” On the surface, this death wouldn’t be a clean sweep because children aren’t suppose to die and from the rest of the poem we, as readers, are unaware of the cause of death of this child. One kind of death that could be thought of as a clean sweep would be the death of an elderly person, who has lived a long life and who is ready to face death. I think that what Williams is trying to do is look at this death from a medical perspective. He might refer to this death as a clean sweep because statistically with the infant mortality rate being so high, the child is likely to die anyway and better that the child be younger and less emotion attached to the child.

In the final stanza of the poem, Williams refers to the child as a “white model of our lives.” I believe Williams is referring to the child as being “white” in the sense that the child is dead, and “model of our lives” because we all began somewhere. Williams is more familiar with the life cycle than most people because of his profession, and sees the little things that matter. We should look at this child after it died because we all looked like that at some point, the beginning point of our lives.

Williams also describes this small child as being surrounded by fresh flowers. Like many of his other poems, Williams is bringing in the element of nature. I find it ironic that he surrounds the child with fresh flowers because the child is dead. I see Williams doing this to show the contrast between death and life and to show how much greater and more beautiful life is compared to death.

Overall, this poem is another one of Williams’ poems that shows his views of death. Williams treats the death of a child much different than he treats the death of an older person. It is unclear in the poem of the gender of the child, but no matter the gender, he makes the child seem peaceful. Because of his religious beliefs, or lack of

religious beliefs, he doesn't believe in heaven but gives the reader some hope that the child went to heaven.

The most interesting thing about this poem is the lack of sentiment in the poem. Williams isn't trying to write this poem to make the readers feel sad about the death of the child, but he is writing it from a medical view to show that death happens and it happens like this. He also shows at the end of the poem that life goes on. He does this by placing fresh cut flowers around the dead child.

Williams also writes about the death of a small child in his short story "Jean Beicke." In this story Williams is describing his rounds at a hospital and a young orphan girl, Jean, who is very ill. She came to the orphanage at about eleven months old, but looked five months old because she was completely unnourished. Throughout the story Williams seems to get more emotionally attached to this little girl. The only interaction that he has with Jean is when he is examining her and trying to help her get better. Although Williams did everything that he could to help Jean, she didn't get better and Williams says "I hated to see that kid go" (163). When he says this, it shows that emotion that he is attaching to the child. He shows emotion because he again sees her death as a defeat because he can't do anything to save her.

Williams' treatment of women also comes alive in this poem. In his other poems about the death of women, he treats women with great respect. In this short story, he doesn't treat Jean with much respect saying "I had to laugh every time I looked at the brat after that" (162). Williams calls Jean a brat, which would infer that he didn't like her and doesn't have much respect for her.

Overall, Williams' ideas about death change when he is talking about the death of old women and young children. He also handles death by looking at it from a professional point of view and a natural point of view. When writing about death, Williams attaches a small amount of emotion but a large amount of respect for the patients and family members that he is writing about.

Williams also uses nature to describe the deaths of these individuals. He uses nature in the sense that death is something that occurs in nature and it's part of the natural life process.

In all of the poems and prose that I have described above, I feel that Williams' biggest theme that occurs when he writes about death is his feeling of defeat. When he is writing about the death of his mother, grandmother, and other old women he is defeat by nature. As a doctor he is well aware that death occurs and there is nothing that can be done about it. He knows that these women must die and he lets them die. He doesn't try to explain their deaths and leaves personal emotions out of these poems, letting nature and death defeat him. When he is writing about the death of small children, he is more concerned with how they are dying especially in his short story about Jean. He wants to help her, but is again willing to be defeat by death knowing that nature will takes it way no matter what he does. When he writes in "The Dead Baby" a "clean sweep" he is again writing about nature taking its course and taking the life of individuals.

His ideas about death and his feelings toward death also apply to his personal life. He suffered a stroke in his fifties but still continued to write poetry until his death in his late seventies. He wasn't going to let nature and death take him out of the physical world young, he fought for his life until he couldn't anymore and then let nature takes it course.

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