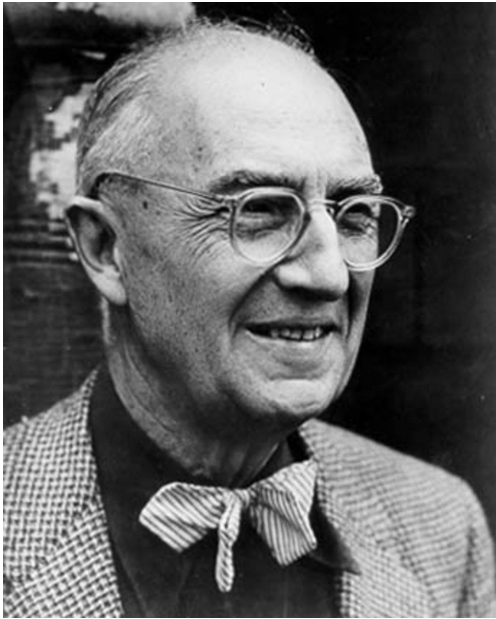


LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 7-12

The Poetry of William Carlos Williams



INTRODUCTION

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) grew up in Rutherford, New Jersey, the son of an English father and Puerto Rican mother. In addition to being an important poet and writer, he was a medical doctor for more than 40 years, serving the community of Rutherford. His daily encounters with patients often informed his writing, creating poems that captured everyday life in the United States. Williams was a leading figure in the Imagist movement, which focused on American subject matter, and emphasized simplicity, expression, and precision through the use of visual images.

LOOKING CLOSER

Good writers, like good artists, recognize the power of detail in their work. A single flower, closely observed and drawn, has the force of the real behind it. Charles Demuth, whose painting of a flower we see here, painted in just this fashion. Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Demuth studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While a student there, he lived in the same boarding house as William Carlos Williams. The two became friends for life. With each pulse of words in Williams' poem, we see a kinship to the vitality in the spare expression of Demuth's flower.

View the artwork in detail on the Museum's [collection page here!](#)



Charles Demuth, *Poppies*, 1926. Watercolor on cardboard. SBMA, Gift of Wright S. Ludington, 1945.6.4..

This lesson was prepared by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Education Department, 2021.

READ: POETRY BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

The poetry of William Carlos Williams is the verbal equivalent of that simple, yet telling sketch. Williams writes about ordinary things with excitement and attention. He looks at what happens to be around him as a scholar examines a great work of art. It is as if every detail he observes is a genius stroke. And so it is important to describe everything exactly—just as it is—the shine of a glass, the white curtain, the rusty bicycle. For Williams, the right words seem to be the simplest words, words that have the music of ordinary talk, plain yet powerful. He writes about things just as they are, without any added scenery or philosophy. His poems are often written in short lines, as if he wanted to separate the details so we would pay attention to each thing and nothing would be lost.

Nantucket

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains –
Smell of cleanliness –

Sunshine of late afternoon –
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying – And the
immaculate white bed.

ACTIVITY: WRITE A POEM ABOUT A PLACE

For this assignment, write a poem like Williams about a place of your choosing. It doesn't have to be exciting or grand. It might be a place most people wouldn't find inspiring but that is important to you. It might be a place where you can go alone to daydream, a spot at the beach, or along a hiking trail. It might also be a place you have only visited once, but remember, as Williams remembered the Nantucket hotel room.

In your poem, be as simple and particular as possible. Close your eyes and imagine you are there. Don't try and put in your emotions, just capture the place as clearly as possible. When you imagine it what do you see first? Next? Last? Write down the details as you think of them. Keep it simple and keep it real. A good title might be the name of the place itself.

OBSERVING A DRAWING OR PAINTING

Keeping the simplicity of Williams in mind, try writing a poem with only one word in each line, like Williams' "The Locust tree in Flower" (below). Williams' poem doesn't make sense as a regular sentence, nor is it a list of purely descriptive words, but it makes sense in the way that it captures the essence of the tree.

THE LOCUST TREE IN FLOWER

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branch
come

white
sweet
May

again.

ACTIVITY: WRITE A POEM WITH ONE WORD/LINE

Look at a drawing or painting of your choice and keep registering your impression of it in one word line after another. Don't try to be logical, make each word a new and important statement. Don't just use adjectives and nouns, include adverbs, verbs, and prepositions. When all the words are put together a picture will emerge, the essence of what you observed. Give your poem a title long enough to show what it is about.

For artwork inspirations, explore SBMA's collection online [here](#).