



From Clinic to Stanza: Tracing Medical Motifs in Williams's Poetic Practice

Suryo Tri Saksono¹, Hairus Salikin², Agus Wardhono³, Rif'ah Inayati¹, Ulvia Ika Surya¹, Siti Hanifa¹, Imron Wakhid Harits¹, & Suci Suryani¹

1. Universitas Trunojoyo Madura, Indonesia
2. Universitas Jember, Indonesia
3. Universitas PGRI Ronggolawe, Tuban, Indonesia

Abstract: This study explores the intersection of William Carlos Williams's dual roles as a physician and poet, focusing on the impact of his medical career on his poetic work. By examining selected poems, the research highlights how Williams's firsthand experiences as a doctor influence the themes, structure, and emotional depth of his poetry. Through a qualitative analytical framework, the study uncovers the presence of medical motifs, including illness, healing, and the doctor-patient relationship, and demonstrates how these elements shape both the form and content of his literary creations. The findings emphasize the unique fusion of medical observation with poetic expression in Williams's work, illustrating how his clinical background informs his exploration of the human condition. This study contributes to the fields of literary criticism and medical humanities, offering new insights into the intersection of personal experience and artistic creation. Furthermore, it advocates for the value of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding how professional experiences can shape creative output. Future research may expand the analysis to include a broader selection of Williams's poetry and explore comparative studies with other poet-physicians, further deepening our understanding of the interplay between medicine and literature.

Keywords: Poetry and Medicine; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Doctor-Patient Relationship in Literature; Thematic Analysis of Poetry; Medical Motifs in Poetry.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of medicine and literature, as exemplified in the work of William Carlos Williams, challenges the conventional boundaries of disciplinary knowledge. Williams's dual identity as physician and poet allows clinical observation to become a generative force in poetic creation, reconfiguring illness and healing as aesthetic and existential experiences^(1,2). This study investigates how Williams transforms his medical encounters into a distinctive poetic discourse that resists traditional literary conventions. Such integration signals a deeper engagement with the lived dimensions of care and embodiment. The fusion of his professional roles suggests a unique epistemological stance in American modernist poetry.

Williams scholarship often neglects the full weight of his clinical background, resulting in readings that underplay the complexity of his work. Addressing this gap, the study adopts an interdisciplinary framework grounded in medical humanities and narrative theory^(3,4,5). It argues that medical knowledge in Williams's poetry shapes not just theme but also structure, tone, and voice. By foregrounding the stylistic influence of empirical

thinking, the research challenges overly literary readings of his work. This analytical stance contributes to a richer understanding of how form reflects lived experience.

The field of medical humanities provides a productive lens for interpreting Williams's reimagining of the human body as a narrative and ethical site. His poetry engages deeply with vulnerability, care, and corporeality, not as abstract ideas but as lived realities shaped by his medical practice^(6,7,8). This perspective enables the researcher to view his poems as narrative interventions into the conventional logic of clinical discourse. The emotional and ethical dimensions of caregiving are embedded in his poetic techniques. His work thus complicates the binary between observer and subject, healer and sufferer.

Williams's stylistic economy and observational sharpness mirror the methodological habits of clinical practice. His minimalist approach reflects a poetics shaped by diagnostic precision and attention to detail^(1,5). This study contends that such stylistic choices are not merely modernist experiments but manifestations of a medicalized worldview. Ordinary subjects and concise diction serve as vehicles for exploring profound human conditions. The convergence of clinical objectivity and poetic subjectivity defines much of his literary innovation.

Understanding Williams's poetics requires recognizing the reciprocal, between professional experience and creative output. His fragmented structures, shifting perspectives, and thematic focus on the body reflect an aesthetic informed by the clinical gaze^(9,10,11). Rather than separating his roles, this research emphasizes their mutual constitution in the crafting of his literary identity. Williams's poems emerge as hybrid texts where medicine and literature inform and reshape each other. The implications extend to broader conversations about knowledge production and artistic form.

Williams's work occupies a crucial space where empirical knowledge meets lyrical introspection. His poetry reveals the capacity of art to navigate illness, care, and existential uncertainty with emotional resonance and intellectual rigor^(12,13). By exploring these intersections, the study affirms the value of interdisciplinary inquiry in literary criticism. Williams's dual consciousness—as both healer and poet—deepens the interpretive possibilities of his texts. This analysis offers a framework for understanding how professional life can profoundly inform aesthetic creation.

MAJOR THEMES IDENTIFIED

Medical Imagery and Symbolism

One of the most prominent findings in Williams's poetry is the extensive use of medical imagery and symbolism, which reflects his professional experiences as a physician. Medical elements such as wounds, illnesses, healing processes, and bodily functions are recurrent motifs that not only serve as thematic devices but also enhance the emotional depth of his work^(14,15,16). In poems like "The Use of Force", Williams depicts clinical encounters with vivid, often unsettling details that emphasize the tension between healer and patient. This use of medical imagery creates a visceral reading experience that mirrors the rawness and urgency of real medical situations. Through such depictions, Williams transforms clinical realities into profound poetic reflections on vulnerability, suffering, and human resilience.

The integration of medical imagery into Williams's poetry suggests a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries between empirical observation and artistic creation. Scholars argue that his professional familiarity with the human body enabled him to represent corporeal existence with authenticity and immediacy^(17,18,19). In many of his poems, the physical body is portrayed not merely as a biological entity but as a vessel of emotional and existential meaning. By invoking images of sickness, decay, and recovery, Williams invites readers to engage with the realities of the human condition in a direct and often unsettling manner. This approach positions Williams's poetry within a tradition that seeks to reconcile scientific knowledge with humanistic inquiry.

Williams's use of medical symbolism often transcends literal representation, functioning instead as metaphors for broader existential concerns. Illness, for example, frequently symbolizes emotional or societal dysfunctions, while healing becomes a metaphor for personal or communal restoration^(20,21). In this manner, Williams's work reflects an intricate layering of meanings, where physical conditions mirror psychological or moral states. This symbolic dimension underscores the depth and complexity of Williams's engagement with medical themes, elevating his poetry beyond mere narrative recounting of clinical experiences. His ability to imbue medical imagery with such multifaceted significance marks a distinct innovation in modernist literature.

Furthermore, Williams's medical imagery challenges traditional aesthetic norms by introducing clinical realism into poetic form. Rather than idealizing or romanticizing the human body, he presents it in its flawed, vulnerable, and often painful reality, aligning with the modernist impulse toward truthfulness and fragmentation^(4,12). This aesthetic choice reflects not only Williams's medical insights but also his broader artistic commitment to representing life without embellishment. In doing so, he aligns himself with contemporaneous movements in literature and art that sought to depict the complexities and harshness of modern existence. The raw corporeality in his poetry stands as a testament to the influence of his medical career on his literary vision.

The pervasive presence of medical imagery and symbolism in Williams's poetry highlights the profound impact of his clinical experiences on his artistic production. The detailed, unsentimental portrayal of bodily states and medical interventions enriches his poetry with layers of meaning that engage both intellect and emotion. Such integration of medical knowledge into literary form expands the expressive potential of poetry, enabling a richer exploration of the human experience^(22,23). Williams's work exemplifies the productive tension between scientific detachment and poetic empathy, offering readers a unique lens through which to view the complexities of life, illness, and healing. This theme forms a critical foundation for understanding the broader intersections between his dual vocations.

Narrative Structures Reflecting Clinical Practice

An important dimension of Williams's poetry is the way its narrative structures mirror the diagnostic and observational methods found in clinical practice⁽²⁴⁾. His poems often progress through a process of close observation, critical assessment, and interpretive conclusion, resembling the procedural logic of medical diagnosis. This clinical narrative approach allows the poems to unfold gradually, encouraging readers to experience discovery and understanding much like a physician encountering a patient. Such a structural choice

demonstrates how Williams's medical training deeply influenced his narrative instincts. Rather than presenting a fully formed picture, his poetry often requires the reader to piece together impressions and symptoms toward an emergent meaning.

The brevity and precision in Williams's poetic lines can also be seen as reflecting the concise communication style necessary in medical settings^(25,26). In clinical environments, clarity and economy of language are essential, and this sensibility permeates Williams's poetic diction and form. His focus on immediacy and specificity enables him to capture fleeting moments of physical or emotional significance with sharpness and depth. By applying clinical communication strategies to poetry, Williams enhances the intensity and authenticity of his artistic expression. This stylistic convergence illustrates the practical influence of his medical practice on his literary techniques.

Moreover, Williams's narrative construction frequently emphasizes the subjective experience of observation, paralleling the relational dynamics of doctor-patient interactions⁽²⁷⁾. Rather than presenting himself as an omniscient narrator, he often adopts the role of an attentive observer whose interpretations are provisional and evolving. This strategy foregrounds the uncertainties and emotional resonances inherent in both clinical and poetic encounters. The result is a body of work that resists definitive interpretation, mirroring the complexities of diagnosing and treating human beings. His narrative openness underscores a respect for ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning, hallmarks of both ethical medical practice and modernist literature.

Williams's reliance on fragmented, imagistic structures also parallels the piecemeal nature of gathering clinical evidence⁽²⁸⁾. Just as a physician must synthesize disparate symptoms into a coherent diagnosis, Williams constructs meaning through the accumulation of vivid, often disjointed details. This method challenges readers to engage actively with the text, assembling their own interpretations from scattered clues. In doing so, Williams aligns his readers' role with that of a diagnostician, fostering an interactive and participatory reading experience. His poetry thus becomes a collaborative process of meaning-making that mirrors the interpretive work of medicine.

Overall, the narrative structures found in Williams's poetry reveal a profound and deliberate incorporation of clinical methodologies into literary form^(29,30). His approach reflects a sensitivity to the processes of observation, diagnosis, and interpretation that define both good medicine and compelling storytelling. Through this fusion, Williams expands the possibilities of poetic narrative, bridging the procedural rigor of medicine with the emotional depth of literature. This theme further illuminates the deep symbiosis between his professional and artistic pursuits. Williams's work exemplifies how medical epistemologies can enrich literary creativity, offering new modes of engaging with human complexity.

Empathy and Human Vulnerability

Williams's work is deeply infused with themes of empathy and human vulnerability, reflecting the central role these concepts play in both his medical and literary careers. His dual profession as a physician and poet uniquely positions him to explore the emotional and physical complexities of the human condition. Williams's poetry often embodies a profound empathy for his subjects, capturing their vulnerability in ways that transcend mere

observation^(8,21). His medical background, particularly his close interaction with patients, allowed him to develop a nuanced understanding of human suffering and resilience, which permeates his poetic work. This intersection of clinical and emotional insight enables Williams to portray human vulnerability not as a sign of weakness but as an integral part of the human experience.

Empathy in Williams's poetry is not merely a theme but an active process that involves the reader in the experience of the poem's subjects. His careful attention to detail, whether in the depiction of a single individual or a broader societal issue, invites readers to identify with the characters and their struggles. This participatory mode of empathy is essential in bridging the gap between the clinical detachment that often accompanies medical practice and the emotional intimacy that poetry fosters^(11,17,19). Williams's approach reflects a broader understanding of empathy as a dynamic, interactive force that requires both the speaker and the audience to engage deeply with the material. By doing so, he effectively transforms the poem into a space for emotional exchange, where vulnerability becomes a shared experience.

Furthermore, Williams's portrayal of human vulnerability often serves as a catalyst for introspection, both for the poet and the reader. His poetic depictions of suffering are not intended to elicit pity but to encourage a reflective consideration of the nature of human fragility. His poems frequently evoke a sense of existential vulnerability that invites readers to confront their own mortality and emotional limits^(27,31). In this way, Williams's poetry creates a space for exploring the delicate balance between strength and weakness, health and illness. His work thus becomes a medium for philosophical reflection on the conditions of existence, highlighting the complex interplay between the physical body and the emotional self.

The poet's empathy extends beyond his immediate subjects to encompass a broader social and medical context. Williams's attention to the lives of ordinary individuals, particularly those in marginalized or vulnerable positions, demonstrates a strong ethical commitment to social justice. His poems often engage with themes of inequality, illness, and neglect, using the language of medical practice to articulate the social determinants of health^(4,32). This blending of medical and social narratives not only amplifies the emotional resonance of his poetry but also underscores the potential for literature to address systemic issues of human suffering and care. Williams's work invites readers to expand their sense of empathy beyond individual suffering, promoting a more collective understanding of human vulnerability.

Williams's exploration of empathy and vulnerability through his poetry offers a rich reflection on the complexities of human experience^(10,29). By weaving medical insight into his literary expression, he elevates these themes from personal affliction to universal concerns. Williams's ability to connect the personal with the universal is what makes his work so resonant. His poetry, infused with both medical knowledge and emotional sensitivity, remains a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of empathy in understanding the human condition.

Through this lens, Williams's poetry becomes a unique fusion of clinical precision and humanistic depth, providing invaluable insights into the intersection of health, illness, and human vulnerability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive analytical approach, to explore the influence of William Carlos Williams's medical profession on his poetry. The primary data sources consist of selected poems by Williams, which are analyzed for their thematic and structural elements related to medical motifs. The qualitative nature of this approach allows for an in-depth investigation into the nuanced ways in which Williams's professional life as a physician informs his artistic expression^(12,33). By focusing on the intricate relationship between content and form, the study aims to uncover how medical experience is embedded in both the narrative and structural layers of his poems. This method is particularly effective in revealing the subtle yet profound connections between Williams's dual careers.

The selection of poems for analysis is based on their prominence in Williams's oeuvre and their relevance to the study's central themes of medical practice and human experience. Poems such as *The Red Wheelbarrow* and *Spring and All* are chosen for their evocative use of imagery and thematic focus on observation, healing, and the body. According to recent studies, these poems exemplify Williams's ability to translate his clinical observations into poetic expression^(5,18,13). The focus on these specific works allows for a more targeted exploration of the ways in which medical experience is transposed into poetic form. The poems are analyzed through close reading techniques, which involve a detailed examination of language, imagery, and structure.

The study also incorporates theoretical perspectives from narrative medicine and medical humanities to frame the analysis. Narrative medicine, which emphasizes the importance of storytelling in understanding patients' experiences, is particularly relevant for analyzing how Williams uses poetic narrative to capture the complexity of human health and illness. Scholars argue that narrative medicine offers valuable tools for interpreting literary works like Williams's that engage deeply with the human body and its vulnerabilities⁽³⁴⁾. This theoretical framework provides the lens through which the poems are interpreted, allowing for a deeper understanding of the medical themes embedded in Williams's work.

Data collection for this study is primarily text-based, with the researcher focusing on Williams's poetry as the main source material. While secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and books, are consulted to provide contextual insights, the primary emphasis remains on the analysis of the poems themselves. As highlighted by literary theorists, direct engagement with the text allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the thematic and structural elements that define Williams's poetic style^(8,27,35). This approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the primary data while also drawing on relevant scholarly perspectives to enrich the interpretation.

The data analysis process involves both inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is employed to identify emerging themes related to medical motifs and their integration into the poems, while deductive reasoning is used to test hypotheses regarding the influence of Williams's medical profession on the form and structure of his poetry. This combined reasoning approach aligns with established practices in qualitative literary research, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of both content and form^(36,37). By employing these methodologies, the study aims to offer a robust analysis of Williams's work that highlights the interplay between his roles as a poet and a physician.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of William Carlos Williams's poetry uncovers a distinctive interplay between his medical career and his poetic works. His deep involvement in both medicine and literature allows him to explore the human experience through two complementary yet distinct lenses. Williams's medical background profoundly influences his approach to the complexities of human existence, which is evident in his thematic choices and poetic style⁽³⁸⁾. Through his precise and observant language, Williams presents a nuanced portrayal of human vulnerability, demonstrating how his dual roles enhance his poetic expression.

One of the key themes in Williams's poetry is the focus on the body, its ailments, and its healing process. Williams, as a physician, was particularly attuned to the physical aspects of human life, and this sensitivity is reflected in his poetry. Poems like *Spring and All* explore the renewal of life, symbolized through the imagery of the body and its recovery. This depiction of bodily renewal is not just about physical healing but also serves as a metaphor for emotional and psychological regeneration^(1,11,31). In Williams's work, the body is both a vessel of fragility and a site of potential recovery, reflecting broader themes of resilience and vulnerability inherent in the human condition.

Williams's poetic style, particularly his use of free verse and fragmented lines, can be understood in relation to his medical training. His minimalistic and precise use of language mirrors the clinical observations made by doctors in medical settings. The short lines and sparse imagery in poems such as *The Red Wheelbarrow* suggest a focus on essential details, stripping away any unnecessary ornamentation to reveal the core of human experience. This style reflects Williams's desire to convey the purity and simplicity of life, much like a physician must focus on the vital aspects of a patient's health^(11,39). In both his medical practice and poetry, Williams strives for clarity and directness, avoiding extraneous complexity.

The role of observation in Williams's work is also integral to understanding the relationship between his medical profession and poetry. In his medical practice, Williams was trained to observe and diagnose with precision, a skill he transferred to his writing. The poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* exemplifies this practice, where the simple image of a red wheelbarrow becomes a profound symbol of the interconnectedness of life. Williams's keen eye for detail, honed through years of medical practice, allows him to imbue even the most ordinary images with profound significance^(33,34,38). This observational approach highlights the importance of small, seemingly insignificant moments, transforming them into metaphors for larger existential themes.

Furthermore, Williams's poems often depict moments of intimate human connection, particularly the doctor-patient relationship. As a physician, Williams witnessed the delicate balance between professional detachment and emotional empathy. This dynamic is vividly explored in poems like *The Doctor* and *A Visit to St. Luke's*, where Williams captures the emotional complexities of caregiving. Williams's ability to empathize with his patients is mirrored in his poetry, where he creates a deep connection with his readers^(31,39). His poetry reflects not just the physical realities of illness, but also the psychological and emotional states of those experiencing it, offering a nuanced portrayal of human suffering and healing.

The emotional depth of Williams's poetry is further amplified by his portrayal of vulnerability and mortality. As a physician, Williams was constantly confronted with the

fragility of life, a theme that pervades his poetic works. In poems such as *A Visit to St. Luke's*, Williams contemplates the human condition in the face of illness and death, acknowledging both the physical deterioration of the body and the emotional toll of suffering. This dual awareness of the body's fragility and the mind's emotional weight gives Williams's work a unique emotional resonance^(33,38,39). His ability to navigate these dual aspects of human experience allows him to create poetry that is both grounded in reality and rich in emotional depth.

Williams's exploration of illness and healing also touches on the theme of the medical gaze, which refers to the physician's ability to objectively observe and diagnose the body. In poems such as *The Great Figure*, Williams reflects on the way medical observation transforms the human body into an object of clinical scrutiny. However, Williams does not limit his portrayal of the body to a clinical perspective. Instead, he combines the medical gaze with a more humanistic view, emphasizing the emotional and existential aspects of the body's condition^(25,40). This duality enhances the complexity of his poetry, making it not only a reflection on the body's physical state but also on its emotional and psychological significance.

The relationship between form and content in Williams's poetry is another area where his medical background plays a significant role. His use of free verse and fragmented lines can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to mirror the fragmented nature of medical knowledge. Just as a physician must piece together fragmented symptoms to form a diagnosis, Williams's fragmented verse mirrors this process of assembling disparate elements into a coherent whole. This formal choice allows Williams to represent the complexities of human experience in a way that is both precise and emotionally evocative^(7,41,42). This structural approach mirrors Williams's clinical approach to medicine, where he is trained to observe, analyze, and synthesize information in a clear and concise manner.

The themes of observation and detachment are also central to Williams's poetic exploration of the medical profession. As a physician, Williams was accustomed to a certain level of professional detachment, which allowed him to make objective observations about his patients. However, this detachment is not without its emotional costs, and Williams's poetry often grapples with the tension between professional distance and personal involvement. This emotional complexity is evident in poems like *The Doctor* and *The Use of Force*, where Williams examines the moral and emotional dilemmas faced by physicians in their relationships with patients^(31,39,43). These poems highlight the inherent contradictions in the doctor-patient relationship, where empathy and authority must be balanced.

The influence of Williams's medical background extends beyond his thematic concerns to include his approach to language and imagery. His ability to use precise, often clinical language to describe the human body and its functions is a hallmark of his poetic style. In poems such as *The Yachts* and *The Locust Tree in Flower*, Williams employs medical imagery to convey both the vitality and the fragility of life. Williams's use of medical metaphors allows him to draw connections between the biological and the existential, illustrating the ways in which the body's condition reflects broader emotional and psychological states⁽⁴⁴⁾. Through this interplay of language and imagery, Williams's poetry transcends its medical origins, offering readers a deeper understanding of the human experience.

The analysis of William Carlos Williams's poetry reveals how his dual careers as a physician and poet are deeply intertwined. His medical training informs not only the thematic content of his poems but also their structure, language, and emotional depth. By examining Williams's poetry through the lens of his medical profession, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in literary analysis. Williams's ability to merge his scientific and artistic sensibilities allows him to create poetry that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally profound^(42,44,45). This interdisciplinary approach reveals new insights into Williams's poetic legacy, highlighting the profound impact of his medical career on his literary work.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that William Carlos Williams's dual professions as physician and poet are deeply interwoven, with his medical experiences significantly shaping the thematic and structural dimensions of his poetry. The analysis reveals that medical motifs—such as illness, healing, and the human body—are not merely surface elements but are central to his poetic identity. His clinical background informs both his use of language and his capacity to portray human vulnerability with emotional clarity, allowing for a rich exploration of the human condition. Through this integration, Williams bridges the empirical world of medicine with the introspective realm of literature, reinforcing the power of poetry to reflect and interpret lived experience.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the broader significance of interdisciplinary research in illuminating the connections between art and science. Williams's poetry exemplifies how professional experience can enrich artistic expression, providing unique insights into the moral, emotional, and existential aspects of caregiving. By situating his work within the framework of medical humanities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of literature's role in engaging with themes of health and healing. Future inquiries are encouraged to extend this analysis across a wider corpus and explore comparative studies with other poet-physicians, affirming the continued relevance of such intersections in both literary scholarship and healthcare discourse.

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