



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## THE PINK SLIPPERS: AN ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' POEM "THE THINKER" THROUGH THE LENS OF IMAGISM

**Mizpah R**

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Manuscript Info

#### Manuscript History

Received: 31 October 2023

Final Accepted: 30 November 2023

Published: December 2023

#### Key words:-

Image, Imagism, Poetry, Modernism

### Abstract

Imagism is a movement of poetry in which the practitioners confer a larger meaning with concrete imagistic words in their poems. One such poem in "The Thinker" by William Carlos Williams. The current research paper studies the poem with reference to the features of imagism put forward by Ezra Pound and F. S. Flint. It brings out how the image of the pink slippers suggest mundanity, search for meaning in life, happiness, and solace among several other things.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2023. All rights reserved.

### Introduction:-

#### Imagism:

Imagism is a subset of the Modernist movement in literature (Gray 359). It is associated with the genre of poetry. The imagist movement came to prominence in the 1910s in America with the leading efforts of Ezra Pound, the expatriate poet. Other poets associated with imagism are Hila Doolittle, F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, and others. They were given a title as "Imagiste." The foundations of the imagist poetry can be traced back to 1909 when T. E. Hulme published poems like "Autumn" and "A City Sunset". If Pound was the founder of imagism, Hulme was the father of imagism.

Imagism is the usage of concrete and economic words to evoke an experience in the reader. This evoking of experience is not done through detailed explanations but by the deliberate usage of compact and spirit filled words. Abstractions which were characteristic of Romantic and Victorian poetry are discarded. Imagist poems are the finest examples of concrete poetry. They are in much resemblance to the Japanese haikus.

Pound's definition of the image was "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Gray 360). He said, "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." F. S. Flint, in March 1913, published "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste", in which he provided three rules for imagist poems, quoting Pound. The three rules were:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding the rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase not in sequence of the metronome.

"The point of Imagism," Pound wrote in 1914, "is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image itself is the speech. The image is the word beyond the formulated argument."

**Corresponding Author:- Mizpah R**

Address:- Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Analysis:-

#### Imagism in the poem “The Thinker” by William Carlos Williams:

William Carlos Williams is known for his invention of a fresh poetry, in which the subject matter was centred on the everyday circumstances of life and the lives of common people. Pessimism, a characteristic of modernism is also embedded in the poem though the reader can feel the sorrow of the poet only when he/she is aware of Williams’ biography. Williams was a doctor cum poet. He practised both the professions for a long time even after facing a heart attack in 1948. Strokes haunted him in a series, and after the third stroke he let go of medicine, and went on to write till his death in 1963 (Wikipedia contributors). When the stroke left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak again, with his one hand, he wrote his poems. Such were the hardships and resistance that Williams endured and all the tough times inform his poetry.

The current poem “The Thinker” taken for analysis is about the mundanity of domestic life in the early 20th century. It has “new pink slippers” as the central image. The poet describes how the pink slippers give him solace in a harsh world, as the first half of the 20th century was known for capitalistic exploitation and the world wars. It is noteworthy that this poem was published after the First World War in 1921 in Williams’ book *Sour Grapes: A Book of Poems*. The “thinker” in the title stands for the poet himself who describes the slippers in relation to the thoughts they evoke in his mind. The following paragraphs study the poem in reference to the three rules of imagist poetry.

The central focus of the poem is the new pink slippers of the poet’s wife. It is the primary image in the poem; the secondary images include the various household things like bed, stair, doors, and table. All these images evoke the domestic setting of a typical house in the modern age. The poet speaks as if the slippers have got life in them, like they have a soul of their own. This is evident as he says that the pompons in the slippers are “gay,” which is usually attributed to human beings. In a way, it is a personification. The poet says, “All night they lie together.” This is interesting because inanimate objects like slippers are attributed to the human quality of sleeping at night. Then follows a feast of movements that take place in the house in the morning as the people get ready for work. Williams puts it like this: “Later I watch them / descending the stair, / hurrying through the doors / and round the table, / moving stiffly / with a shake of their gay pompons!” This evokes a lively picture in the reader. The lines quoted above speak of the wife’s sincerity and swiftness in getting her husband ready for work. So, the slippers are a symbol that represents the poet’s wife. The colour “pink” is important to note as it is closely related to women and girls. The life thus attributed to the slippers can be understood as the liveliness of the wife. This becomes more relevant as towards the end of the poem the poet says that he talks to the slippers at night out of happiness. This can be seen as the reunion with his wife at night after a tiresome day’s work, and talking with her all night gives him happiness; as the husband comes home in the evening, he is full of “pure happiness” as he finds solace in his wife. In accordance with the first rule, this poem thus makes a direct treatment of the “thing,” which is the pink slippers. It may be taken objectively to mean just the slippers and other objects, but at the same time it can be extended to the subjective aspects like the relationship with the wife. This is important because the poem is vague and open to many interpretations as the subjective meaning of the poem may mean anything to the readers, it may mean unique things to every single reader in relevance to his own life. Again, this feature of vagueness is a modernist tendency. The primary Imagist objective is to avoid rhetoric and moralizing, to stick closely to the object or experience being described. The image, in Pound’s opinion, could do all the work of suggestion, evocation; and the poet, or any writer, need hardly ever, if at all, move into explicit generalization. These features are explicit in the present poem “The Thinker.”

The second rule is about diction. The rule is that unnecessary words like superfluous adjectives and adverbs should be avoided. Each word should be carefully sought that each word contributes to the meaning of the poem. Significant words, without which the poem cannot function, must be used. In short, the poem should be compact and pithy. “Cut and cut again wherever you write,” William Carlos Williams himself has suggested his fellow poet Denise Levertov, “— while you leave by your art no trace of your cutting — and the final utterance will remain packed with what you have to say” (Gray 360). In his poem, “The Thinker,” Williams abides by his tip that he has given to Levertov. The poem has 80 words, out of which 38 are meaning packed content words. This shows Williams’ economy in the usage of words. The content words are as follows: wife, new, pink, slippers, gay, pompons, spot, stain, satin toes, sides, all night, lie together, bed’s edge, shivering, catch sight, smile, morning, watch, descending the stair, hurrying through the doors, round the table, moving stiffly, shake of their gay pompons, talk, secret mind, pure happiness. These words need no explanation, that even without the functional words like auxiliary verbs and pronouns, these words are likely to evoke the meaning in the reader’s mind. All these words contribute to the wholeness of the poem. With an additional adornment of literary devices like personification, alliteration (and

consonance) in the lines: “not a spot or a stain / on their satin toes or their sides” (this may refer to the wife’s purity and innocence), “Shivering I catch sight of them / and smile, in the morning,” and assonance that abounds in almost all the words (refer the above list of words) with all the words having some vowel sound in them, add to the literariness of the poem. Each word is thus inevitable for this poem to be organic. So, the second rule of Imagism is applied well in the poem “The Thinker.” It is useful to note that the words are commonplace in nature like most other Modernist poems.

The third rule is about the meter and rhythm used in the poem. Modernist poets abandoned traditional meters into applying free verse in their poems. “The Thinker” is no exception. Pound says about rhythm as follows: “Rhythm MUST have meaning. It can’t be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense” rather it should be able “to produce movements and melodies intrinsic to the occasion: tough, sinuous, sharply etched rhythms that described the contours of an individual experience – a hidden but clearly audible music that captured the pace, poise, and tone of the personal voice. In this sense, Imagism – and the many modernist poets who pursued a necessary organic rhythm – took their cue, not only from the innovations of an obvious experimentalist in free verse like Walt Whitman, but from idiosyncratic rhythmists like Poe and Dickinson. And to this extent, the Imagist belief in a flexible verse form (which was in turn the symptom of a broader commitment to an open, unpremeditated structure) was to find expression both in the language experiments of e.e. cummings and Marianne Moore, and in the less extreme but no less original musical shapes of Hart Crane” writes Richard Gray in his book *A History of American Literature*. Each line in the current poem presents one single idea and thus makes it easier to articulate when the poem is read aloud. The diction is like that of prose: “All night they lie together / under her bed’s edge. / Shivering I catch sight of them / and smile, in the morning.” The language style employed suggests the sweetness of domestic life, this is prominent in the line: “moving stiffly / with a shake of their pom-poms!” and the last sentence “And I talk to them / in my secret mind / out of pure happiness.” Assonance and consonance, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph, adds to the natural rhythm of the words employed. The rhythm of the diction is thus as organic as it can be, very much in line with the theme of the poem – the sadness as well as the sweetness of the domestic life in a post-World War I home.

“The Thinker” is hence a paradigm of Imagism with concreteness, compactness, and organicness – the three rules of Imagist poetry put in single words. There are no rhymes, no regular meter, and no moralizing. Thus, it is realistic in nature, poignant with the joy of living juxtaposed with the bitter harsh realities of post-war life. The image of a trivial object like pink slippers evokes “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Wordsworth).

### Works Cited:-

1. Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. 2004. 2nd ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
2. *The Thinker by William Carlos Williams*. [www.poetry.com/poem/39725/the-thinker](http://www.poetry.com/poem/39725/the-thinker).
3. Wikipedia contributors. “William Carlos Williams.” Wikipedia, 18 Sept. 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Carlos\\_Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Carlos_Williams).
4. Wordsworth, William. “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” *Poetry Foundation*, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood).