

new jersey 350

innovation • diversity • liberty

William Carlos Williams: The Poet of Paterson

Target Age: Elementary (Grades 3-5)/Middle School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Bergen
NJ 350th Theme: Innovation

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR. 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

L.CCR. 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

NJ Common Core Standards:

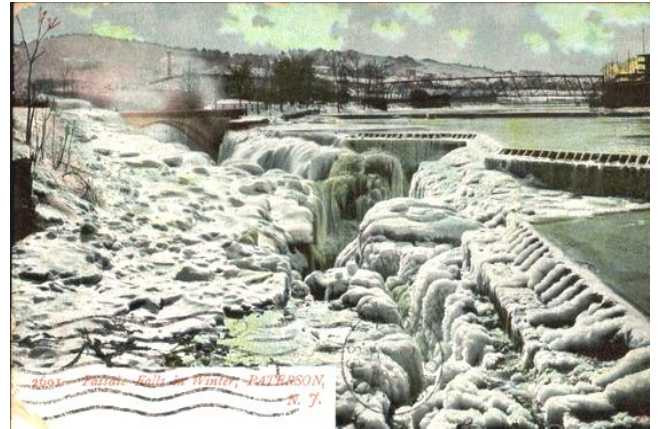
Social Studies: 6.1.12.B.6.a, 6.1.12.B.6.b, and 6.1.12.D.8.a

FOCUS QUESTION: How has New Jersey been reflected by its poetry and its poets?

BACKGROUND:

Born in 1883, William Carlos Williams grew up in New Jersey, spent two of his teen years in Europe, but returned home to attend Horace Mann High School. He earned his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, built a private practice, and served as head pediatrician at Passaic General Hospital. In 1913, he bought a house with his wife Flossie, at 9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, and lived there until his death in 1963. In his book, *“Something Urgent I Have To Say To You”*: *The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams*, Herbert Leibowitz writes, “you are never far from Rutherford in any of Williams’s poems.”

Influenced by his working class patients of New Jersey, Williams inspired generations of poets. He sought to explore the experience of everyday life in working-class New Jersey, and was a devotee of the imagist movement, a short lived literary group (1912-1917) which stressed precise, clear language. Leibowitz writes that Williams sought “to pioneer a distinctively American poetic based on speech rhythms.”



Passaic Falls in winter, Paterson, New Jersey, circa 1901-1906.
Postcard number: 2601, National Trust Library Historic Postcard
Collection, University of Maryland

One of Williams' best known poems is "The Red Wheelbarrow." Project an image of the poem on a whiteboard or screen (or simply write it on a chalkboard) and ask students to briefly sketch the ideas and images they imagine as the poem is read aloud:

"The Red Wheelbarrow" (first published in 1923)

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

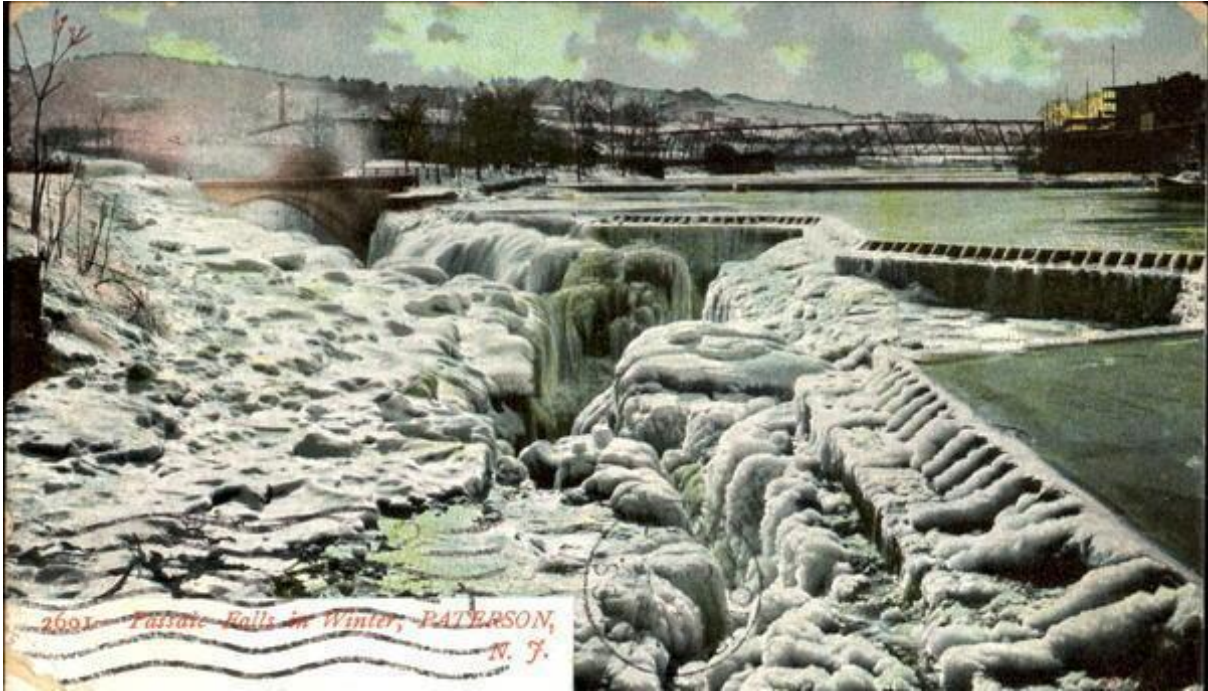
glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Once students feel comfortable thinking about the interplay of words and images, move on to an excerpt from Williams' epic five-volume poem called "Paterson," for which he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1963.

ACTIVITY:

Published in five volumes between 1946 and 1958, "Paterson" is perhaps Williams' best known and most influential work. Williams personifies Paterson, NJ, describing the city as lying "on his right side, head near the thunder of the waters filling his dreams!" Project the poem onto the board (or print out copies) and read it out loud to your students. Ask them to trace the narrative of "he," or the city of Paterson, and to identify specific "things," or images throughout the rest of the poem. Once the class has had a chance to dissect its various parts, ask them to speculate on the overall meaning or story of the poem. You might wish to begin by showing a few pictures of Great Falls (such as that on page 1 of this activity, which appears below in greater detail):



Passaic Falls in winter, Paterson, New Jersey, circa 1901-1906. Postcard number: 2601, National Trust Library Historic Postcard Collection, University of Maryland

Several other digital images of Passaic Falls which might help students visualize Williams' poem appear in the same National Trust Historic Postcards Collection at the University of Maryland (which are in the public domain). For examples, see:

"Passaic Falls, Paterson, New Jersey:" <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/image?pid=umd:84822>

"Passaic Falls during a Great Flood:" <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/image?pid=umd:84881>

"Passaic Falls from the Basin:" <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/image?pid=umd:84884>

This collection includes nine historic postcards of Passaic Falls in all.

From Book I, "Paterson" (published from 1946-1958)

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He
lies on his right side, head near the thunder
of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,
his dreams walk about the city where he persists
incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.
Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his machinations
drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river
animate a thousand automations. Who because they
neither know their sources nor the sills of their
disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
for the most part,

locked and forgot in their desires-unroused.

—Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident—
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
secret—into the body of the light!

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to gray beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves-
the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists-

(What common language to unravel?
. . .combed into straight lines
from that rafter of a rock's
lip.)

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
—who are in love. Two women. Three women.
Innumerable women, each like a flower.

But
only one man—like a city.

FOLLOW-UP:

Proponents of the Imagist Movement, like William Carlos Williams, wanted to “to present an image.” “We are not a school of painters,” he wrote, “but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities... to produce a poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.” Charles Demuth, a friend of Williams’, was inspired by his poem “The Great Figure,” and in 1928 painted “I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold.”

Either project the poem or print copies of “The Great Figure” for your students. Read the poem out loud and ask students to find the “hard and clear” details. Then project an image of Demuth’s painting on the board (available online from the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/488315>). Ask students to be as specific as possible about what they see, and to match up their observations of text from the poem to visual elements of the painting.

“The Great Figure” (first published in 1920)

By William Carlos Williams

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

If time permits, you may want to return to the poem in this activity's introduction, "The Red Wheelbarrow," which presents a nice contrast to "The Great Figure." The former is about a rural New Jersey landscape, while the latter focuses on an urban scene. Position both poems side by side on a screen and have students take turns identifying concrete passages that illustrate the settings Williams hoped to "visually" capture in words.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places to Visit:

Williams Center for the Arts, Rutherford, NJ: <http://www.williamscenter.org/>

William Carlos Williams Poetry Symposium, an annual event in Rutherford, NJ:
<http://www.williamcarloswilliams.com/>

More Classroom Activities

"William Carlos Williams," The Academy of American Poets (includes a brief history of Williams, a collection of 33 of his poems, and lesson plans for teachers):
<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/william-carlos-williams>

"William Carlos Williams," The Poetry Foundation (includes a more extensive biography of Williams, as well as resources for teachers and children about learning through poetry):
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-carlos-williams> (use the site's search function to find all Williams' related materials).

"Beyond the Figure," Metropolitan Museum of Art (lesson plan featuring Charles Demuth's "I Saw the figure 5 in Gold"): <http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-educators/lesson-plans-and-pre-visit-guides/beyond-the-figure>

For More Information

Gregory Jordan, "A School of Literature That's Called New Jersey," *New York Times* (August 3, 2003; available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/nyregion/a-school-of-literature-that-s-called-new-jersey.html?ref=williamcarloswilliams>).

Herbert Leibowitz, "*Something Urgent I have to Say to You*": *The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940: Whitney Museum of American Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography* (Irvine, CA: Reprint Services Corp, 1948).

CREDIT INFORMATION:

p. 1 & 2: Passaic Falls in winter, Paterson, New Jersey, circa 1901-1906. Postcard number: 2601, National Trust Library Historic Postcard Collection, University of Maryland; <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/image?pid=umd:84868>

It Happened Here: New Jersey is a program of the New Jersey Historical Commission made possible by a grant from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the program do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the New Jersey Council for the Humanities. To access more teaching resources created for this program visit www.officialnj350.com.