The Widow's Lament in Springtime

POEM TEXT

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.
Thirtyfive years
I lived with my husband.
The plumtree is white today
with masses of flowers.
Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red
but the grief in my heart
is stronger than they
for though they were my joy
formerly, today I notice them
and turn away forgetting.
Today my son told me
that in the meadows,
at the edge of the heavy woods
in the distance, he saw
trees of white flowers.
I feel that I would like
to go there
and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.

SUMMARY

I feel depressed by my lawn, where fresh grass grows rapidly and vividly. It's grown this way many times in the past, but it's never made me feel the mixture of pain and numbness I feel this year. My late spouse and I lived together for 35 years. Today, the plum tree is covered in clusters of white flowers. Clusters of flowers weigh down the boughs of the cherry trees and grow yellow and red on some shrubs, but the sorrow I feel outweighs them—since, while they used to make me happy, today I see them and look away, ignoring them immediately. My son mentioned today that, in the fields bordering the big forest on the horizon, he noticed trees blooming white. I feel the desire to walk out there, collapse into the blooms from the trees, and drown in the nearby bog.

THEMES

LOSS, GRIEF, AND DESPAIR

"The Widow's Lament in Springtime" is a portrait of grief and despair. Its speaker, a woman whose husband has died after 35 years of marriage, feels his loss acutely during the first springtime after his death. As a result, she no longer takes joy in the blossoming trees and flowers she used to love. Rather than cheering her up, in fact, the spring flowers feature in her thoughts of suicide: she imagines "sink[ing] into the marsh near them." The poem starkly illustrates how grief can rob the grieving of their ordinary pleasures, draining their appetite for life—or even instilling them with a wish to follow their loved ones into death.

The speaker feels intense grief despite the beauty of the scenery around her. She begins the poem by saying that "Sorrow is my own yard," suggesting that grief is a kind of home for her now—a state she inhabits all day. Though she notices the beauty of the spring blossoms, "the grief in [her] heart / is stronger than they." Her own emotions outweigh any cheer the season might provide. She comments that the flowering trees and bushes "were [her] joy formerly," but this year she "notice[s] them / and turn[s] away forgetting." Her grief is so great that the flowers no longer delight her or even make much of an impression at all.

The poem thus suggests that nothing can compensate for the widow's loss, and by extension, that some grief is too great for easy healing. When the widow's son points out "trees of white flowers" in the distance, she imagines "sink[ing] into the marsh near them." Symbolically, this image conveys that she is completely bogged down by grief. The mention of her son shows that she hasn't lost *everything*: she does have surviving family, a legacy that she and her husband created together, and so on. Yet even her son's presence seems to bring her no comfort. His mention of the flowering trees may be meant to console her, but it only fills her with despairing thoughts.

The poem does not indicate that the woman actually succumbs to despair or harms herself. But it provides no consolation, either: it ends with an image of absolute grief. The widow feels no joys or pleasures, even amid the natural beauty she normally loves; the only thing she "feel[s] that [she] would like" is to follow her husband into death and become part of nature with him. The painful reality of death, the poem suggests, can take

over a mourner's whole life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

NATURE'S BEAUTY AND INDIFFERENCE

The speaker of the poem grieves her husband while a beautiful springtime scene unfolds around her. The juxtaposition is unsettling: the sorrow she feels proves that nature's yearly renewal doesn't heal everything or comfort everyone. In fact, the beauty of spring now strikes the widow as "cold"—reflecting her own emotional withdrawal, perhaps, but also the world's indifference to her suffering. Impressive as it is, the blooming scenery shows how nature doesn't share or respect human emotions: it causes life and death alike as part of the same cycle, and moves on immediately after human loss.

The widow's descriptions suggest not only that she's indifferent to nature's beauty but also that nature is indifferent to her pain. She describes the "new grass flam[ing] as it has flamed / before," but with a "cold fire" that "closes round [her] this year." This paradoxical language implies that the natural world still seems vivid, like fire, but leaves her feeling cold—and is cold *toward* her. (Notice that she views this cold as an active, external force, surrounding and enclosing her, rather than an internal feeling she's projecting onto her surroundings.)

The widow also juxtaposes her harsh personal reality with the impersonal splendor of nature, suggesting that the one has no effect on the other. For example, she follows the statement "Thirtyfive years / I lived with my husband" with the statement "The plumtree is white today / with masses of flowers." The plum tree continues to blossom despite her personal tragedy and, the poem implies, would blossom no matter what happened to her.

The contrast between the widow's misery and nature's beauty illustrates how nature operates independently of human emotions and preferences. The widow notices that "Masses of flowers / load the cherry branches" and the "bushes." Another speaker might find these vibrant flowers consoling, as if nature were paying tribute to the dead, or redemptive, as if life were compensating for death.

Here, however, they seem to have nothing to do with the speaker, or she with them. She "turn[s] away" from them, mirroring the way nature has turned away from her grief and moved on in spite of her. The widow's fantasy of "fall[ing] into those flowers / and sink[ing] into the marsh near them" reinforces this idea. The beauty of the flowers won't stop her from sinking into despair, or even death. Nature is perfectly capable of containing vibrant life and tragic death at the same time, and even within the same scene.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.

Lines 1-6 introduce the poem's speaker, whom the title identifies as a "Widow" grieving in "Springtime." (A "Lament" is an expression of grief or sorrow.) The widow's gender, age, personal circumstances, etc. differ from those of William Carlos Williams, so this is a dramatic monologue: a poem whose speaker is a character separate from the poet.

These opening lines don't say who or what the widow is lamenting; that information is withheld until lines 7-8. Instead, they focus on her experience of "Sorrow." She begins with the statement "Sorrow is my own yard," which suggests both that her yard makes her sad and that, metaphorically, sadness is *like* her own yard. In other words, it's a state so familiar that it seems to belong to her, like a piece of private property.

She goes on to describe her literal yard in more detail. Metaphorically, the bright, quickly-growing "new grass" spreads like fire, or "flames," over the yard. It's a familiar sight—"it has flamed / often before"—but the widow's response has changed "this year." This year, she experiences the sight, and perhaps the feel, of the grass growing around her as a "cold fire / that closes round."

The oxymoronic phrase "cold fire" could suggest that the grass *looks* like flames but *feels* cold to the touch. However, it seems to have more to do with the widow's emotions. Perhaps her emotional response to the grass—or the springtime in general—feels like a mix of passion and detachment, or pain and numbness.

Here and throughout the poem, the free verse is chopped into short, heavily enjambed lines, which suggest that the widow speaks with a halting or short-winded rhythm. At the same time, these first six lines form a run-on sentence. Perhaps, then, this is a speaker who has a lot to say, but who has some difficulty getting the words out, due to strong emotion or other factors.

LINES 7-10

Thirtyfive years
I lived with my husband.

The plumtree is white today
with masses of flowers.

Lines 7-10 juxtapose two very different statements, one concerning the past and the other the present:

> Thirtyfive years
> I lived with my husband.
> The plumtree is white today
> with masses of flowers.

By a kind of associative logic, the phrase "this year" (line 6) seems to make the widow think of the "Thirtyfive years" (line 7) she was married. The repetition (with slight variation) draws out the contrast between *this* year of lonely grief and all those *other* years of stable marriage.

Now the reader understands why the widow is "Lament[ing]": her husband has died, and she's facing spring without him for the first time in thirty-five years. Her delayed disclosure of this information suggests her reluctance to speak directly about her loss. In fact, she never actually says "My husband died"; she just implies this by mentioning how long they were together.

She then turns abruptly—awkwardly—to describing the plum tree, as if she can't even bear to talk at length about her husband, much less his death. In fact, this is the only time she mentions her husband at all. The loss has been so painful, the poem implies, that she can discuss it only in indirect terms.

So why does she bring up the "plumtree" and its "flowers," specifically? For one thing, she's building toward the statement that her "grief" now outweighs the "joy" spring flowers used to bring her. But the white plum-tree flowers might hold symbolic meaning as well. White flowers are often associated with weddings and funerals, for example, so the flowers might be painful reminders of her marriage and his burial. (Though she isn't making a deliberate pun, the word "masses" might also make the reader think of Christian *funeral* masses.) Flowers are also traditional symbols of springtime rebirth—so they may be bitter reminders of the permanence of her husband's death.

LINES 11-16

Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red
but the grief in my heart
is stronger than they

Line 11 begins with the same phrase that ended line 10: "Masses of flowers." The repetition underscores just how many flowers there are on these spring trees—so many that they "load the cherry branches" like a heavy weight.

While pink blossoms cluster on the cherry tree(s), "yellow" and "red" flowers "color some bushes" around the speaker. All in all, it's a beautiful springtime scene—but the widow can't properly enjoy it, because "the grief in my heart / is stronger than [the flowers]." The flowers may look heavy as they "load" the trees and bushes, but they're really delicate and light.

The grief weighing down the widow's heart, on the other hand, is overpowering—not only "stronger" than the flowers themselves but stronger than any hope or cheer they might provide. (Close juxtaposition draws out the parallel, and contrast, between the flowers loading the trees and the grief burdening her heart.)

In this mournful context, the word "Masses" might bring to mind requiem masses (Catholic funeral rites), just as the flowers might bring to mind funerals in general. Rather than filling the widow's mind with thoughts of rebirth and renewal, the flowers make her feel her loss more acutely.

LINES 17-19

for though they were my joy
formerly, today I notice them
and turn away forgetting.

Having declared that "the grief in my heart / is stronger than" the blossoms on the trees, the widow explains:

> for though they were my joy
> formerly, today I notice them
> and turn away forgetting.

Her grief outweighs the "joy" she used to take in these beautiful flowers. This year, she merely "notice[s]" them (as opposed to contemplating them, savoring them, etc.), then "turn[s] away forgetting"—forgets about them immediately and shifts her attention elsewhere.

The phrase "turn away forgetting" could have a second meaning here, though not necessarily one that the widow intends. It could mean that she sees the flowers and *turns away*, or rejects, "forgetting" itself—that is, refuses to forget her late husband.

The enjambment in lines 17-18 highlights the words just before and after the line break: "joy" and "formerly." ("Formerly" receives further emphasis because it's immediately followed by a caesura.) These words help underline the key emotional shift in the poem. The widow *used* to take joy in springtime, and by extension in life (apparently in part because she had a satisfying marriage), but now even the most beautiful spring day fails to make her happy (because she's grieving for her husband).

LINES 20-24

Today my son told me
that in the meadows,
at the edge of the heavy woods
in the distance, he saw
trees of white flowers.

Lines 20-24 introduce another character in the poem: the son of the widow and her late husband. The widow relates something her son told her earlier that day:

> Today my son told me
> that in the meadows,
> at the edge of the heavy woods
> in the distance, he saw
> trees of white flowers.

It's possible that the son told her this in an effort to cheer her up, knowing how much his mother usually loves flowers. He might also be trying to cheer himself up, since he's just lost his father. It's unclear why he was out in the "meadows" near distant "woods," but perhaps he was taking a contemplative walk or trying to enjoy the springtime himself.

There's some symbolism to this image, too, whether the son is aware of it or not: the white flowers blooming "at the edge" of the dark woods might represent life conquering the darkness of death, hope returning after the darkness of sorrow, or something similar.

The presence of her son shows that the widow isn't totally alone in the world. She still lives with or near at least one close family member, who may be trying to lift her spirits. If he is trying, however, he doesn't seem to be succeeding. The word "heavy"—an unusual adjective to apply to "woods"—reflects the widow's state of mind as grief continues to weigh her down.

LINES 25-28

> *I feel that I would like*
> *to go there*
> *and fall into those flowers*
> *and sink into the marsh near them.*

Lines 25-28 end the poem with what seems to be a death wish, or at least an expression of despair. Now that the widow's son has told her about "trees of white flowers" near the "woods," she confesses:

> I feel that I would like
> to go there
> and fall into those flowers
> and sink into the marsh near them.

If telling her about the flowers was her son's attempt to lift her spirits, it didn't work. His description seems to prompt a suicidal fantasy, as she imagines heading to that beautiful spot and dying there. (In her mind, "sink[ing] into the marsh," or boggy wetlands, might be a way of disappearing without a trace.) Losing her husband has been so painful that she wants to follow him into death.

However, notice the slightly cautious phrasing: "I feel that I would like / to go there" rather than "I would like to go there" (or "I plan to go there"). Perhaps she's describing her feelings in a detached way rather than expressing a serious intention.

The halting rhythm of the sentence, broken up by enjambment, reflects her weariness, as does her desire to "fall" to the earth. Whether or not she's literally suicidal, her fantasy of drowning in a marsh suggests that she feels hopelessly bogged down by sorrow.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

The poem is chock full of flowers: the word itself occurs at the end of four separate lines, and many other lines relate to flowers in some way. Flowers are symbols of springtime, and, in turn, of renewal after death or deprivation (traditionally symbolized by winter). They are also common symbols of love, though they can be associated with death as well (as in the case of funeral flowers).

The flowers in the poem seem to carry all these associations. The speaker is grieving her husband of 35 years. The abundant blossoms may serve as painful reminders of their love, of his death and funeral, or both. (In fact, the clumps of flowers are twice described as "masses," a word that may be meant to evoke the Christian funeral ceremony known as a requiem mass.) These flowers also represent springtime healing and renewal, contrasting sharply with the widow's continued sense of loss.

The color of the flowers is important, too. In many cultures, flowers are traditional symbols of innocence, purity, and/or peacefulness. For this reason, they often feature in both weddings and memorial ceremonies. It's no accident that the widow segues abruptly from mentioning her husband to mentioning white flowers (lines 7-10), or that white flowers figure in her suicidal thoughts (lines 25-28). Consciously or unconsciously, she seems to associate white flowers, in particular, with marriage and death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-19
- Line 24
- Lines 25-28

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem repeats a number of key words, sometimes with variations, as a way of underscoring its main images, symbols,

and themes. A few examples:

- The near-repetition of "flames" and "flamed" (line 3) reinforces the meaning of lines 2-4: the "new grass," spreading like flames over the yard, returns year after year.
- The near-repetition of "year" and "years" (lines 6-7) highlights the passage of time in the poem, as well as the contrast between the speaker's feelings in former "years" versus "this year."
- The poem mentions a "plumtree" in line 9 and "trees" in line 24, suggesting that trees grow thickly in this landscape (which appears to be fairly rural).
- The repetition of "flowers" (lines 10, 11, 24, 27, each time at the end of a line) conveys the sheer abundance of the springtime flowers, and perhaps suggests that, to the grieving widow, they seem excessive or overwhelming. "White" flowers are mentioned twice, hinting at possible color symbolism. (White flowers are often associated with both weddings and funerals, for example. See the Symbols section for more.)
- The repetition of the phrase "masses of flowers" at the end of line 10 and the start of line 11 (an example of the device anadiplosis) again conveys the teeming abundance of the flowers. It may also point to a play on words, as *masses* can also refer to Christian religious ceremonies, including funeral ceremonies.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "flames," "flamed"
- **Line 6:** "year"
- **Line 7:** "years"
- **Line 9:** "plumtree," "white"
- **Lines 10-11:** "masses of flowers. / Masses of flowers"
- **Line 24:** "trees," "white," "flowers"
- **Line 27:** "flowers"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes the widow's sorrow and loss with the cheerful abundance of the springtime vegetation. The widow alternates between discussing her grief (or her husband) and describing the grass, flowers, and trees growing around her. In lines 15-19, she draws a connection between the two subjects:

> but the grief in my heart
> is stronger than they
> for though they were my joy
> formerly, today I notice them
> and turn away forgetting.

She used to take "joy" in the springtime flowers, but now her "grief" is the "stronger" emotion and prevents her from appreciating them.

This is the connection the *speaker* draws, but the *poem* invites the reader to find other meanings in this juxtaposition as well. For example, the poem may be commenting on nature's indifference to human suffering, or to human life and death in general. It may be illustrating the harsh truth that the spring flowers blossom—the world moves on—whether we live or die. As far as nature is concerned, life, death, and rebirth are just part of the same impersonal process. (The widow reinforces this idea when she imagines "fall[ing] into those flowers / and sink[ing] into the marsh near them." She, too, could die without altering the course of the springtime or the beauty of the natural scene.)

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily enjambed throughout; only 6 of the 28 lines are end-stopped with punctuation. In at least two cases, the poem even omits end-line punctuation where it would normally occur, as if to create *emphatic* enjambment. (Under standard punctuation rules, commas would fall at the end of lines 14 and 16.)

The constant enjambment, combined with the short lines, makes the widow's speech sound fragmented. This, in turn, reflects the pain she is feeling and through which she is speaking with difficulty. By splitting up her phrases in ways that prose wouldn't, the line breaks help convey her *emotional* brokenness.

Enjambment also helps highlight particular words—sometimes those that fall just before the line break, sometimes those that fall just after, sometimes both. For example, the enjambments at the ends of lines 11 and 27 emphasize the word "flowers," which also occurs at the ends of two of the poem's sentences (lines 10 and 24). In the process, they draw the reader's attention to the abundance of the flowers, which also keep catching the widow's attention. The enjambment in lines 17-18 places extra weight on the words "joy" and "formerly," the second of which is further emphasized by the caesura after it:

> for though they were my joy
> formerly, today I notice them [...]

This emphasis highlights the emotional shift at the center of the poem: the difference between the way the speaker *used* to feel about spring and the way she feels now. (In other words, the difference between how she felt as a wife and how she feels as a widow.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "yard / where"
- **Lines 2-3:** "grass / flames"
- **Lines 3-4:** "flamed / often"
- **Lines 4-5:** "not / with"
- **Lines 5-6:** "fire / that"
- **Lines 7-8:** "years / I"
- **Lines 9-10:** "today / with"
- **Lines 11-12:** "flowers / load"
- **Lines 12-13:** "branches / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "bushes / yellow"
- **Lines 14-15:** "red / but"
- **Lines 15-16:** "heart / is"
- **Lines 16-17:** "they / for"
- **Lines 17-18:** "oy / formerly"
- **Lines 18-19:** "them / and"
- **Lines 20-21:** "me / that"
- **Lines 22-23:** "woods / in"
- **Lines 23-24:** "saw / trees"
- **Lines 25-26:** "like / to"
- **Lines 26-27:** "there / and"
- **Lines 27-28:** "flowers / and"

METAPHOR

The widow begins her "Lament" with a mix of concrete imagery and metaphorical language:

> Sorrow is my own yard
> where the new grass
> flames as it has flamed
> often before but not
> with the cold fire
> that closes round me this year.

The statement "Sorrow is my own yard" is a bit ambiguous, but it seems to mean two things at once:

- Literally, her yard (with its springtime flowers, etc.) makes her feel sorrow.
- Metaphorically, sorrow is a state she inhabits all the time now, as if it's her own backyard.

The "flam[ing]" is also metaphorical: it means that the "new grass" seems to be spreading as quickly and vividly as a blaze. Meanwhile, "cold fire" is a metaphor for the widow's emotional response as she observes this springtime scene. Grief makes her feel numbness and anguish all at once, and seems to "close[] round" her or envelop her like flames as the grass grows all around her. (Remember, the grass, and the springtime growth in general, is a reminder that the world has moved on from her husband's death even if she hasn't.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sorrow is my own yard"
- **Lines 2-6:** "where the new grass / flames as it has flamed / often before but not / with the cold fire / that closes round me this year."

IMAGERY

The poem is loaded with vivid imagery, most of it visual. For example, the speaker describes many visual features of the landscape around her, including "grass," "flowers," "trees," "bushes," "meadows," "woods," and a "marsh." She notes the color of some of the flowers, too: "white," "yellow," and "red."

As she layers on detail after detail, a lush springtime scene takes shape in the reader's mind, contrasting with her inner state of "Sorrow" and deprivation. However, the last image in the poem—the "marsh"—fits her mood better, as it evokes the grief that has bogged her down. Similarly, the verb "load" (applied to the flowers weighing down the "cherry branches" in line 12) and the adjective "heavy" (applied to the "woods" in line 22) reflect the depression weighing on her mind.

There's also a hint of tactile (touch-based) imagery in lines 5-6. The widow describes the "cold fire / that closes round" her as she observes the springtime grass. This paradoxical image is partly a metaphor for her emotional response—a mix of pain and numbness—and partly a visual description of the way the grass spreads rapidly, like a fire. However, it could also evoke the *feel* of the grass, which may well be cold in the springtime air.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 9-14
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 27-28

VOCABULARY

Lament () - A poem, song, speech, etc. expressing sorrow or grief.

Flames/Flamed (Line 3) - Here used metaphorically to describe the rapid, vivid growth of the grass, which seems to spread as quickly as a fire.

Plumtree (Line 9) - A shrub or small tree that produces plums, as well as white flowers in the springtime.

Masses (Line 10, Line 11) - Large amounts; heaps or clusters.

Marsh (Line 28) - A bog or wetland area.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of a single stanza of free verse. Though it doesn't have a meter, it's broken into short lines that don't vary too much in length. The syllable count per line ranges from three (line 26) to nine (line 18) and mostly stays in the middle of that range.

The poem doesn't have a rhyme scheme, either, but it does repeat the word "flowers" at the end of four different lines (lines 10, 11, 24, and 27), in what might be described as an identical rhyme. Similarly, the words "year" and "years" fall at the end of lines 6 and 7, respectively, and "them" ends lines 18 and 28. However, these are much subtler effects than traditional end rhyme.

These formal choices shape the poem's meaning in a variety of ways. The short lines give the impression that the widow, in her "Sorrow," is speaking slowly and with great effort. Free verse allows the dramatic monologue to unfold naturally and conversationally rather than sounding stylized and "poetic." (Williams used free verse throughout his career, often in an effort to capture the natural rhythms of American speech.)

The recurring words, meanwhile, help underline the poem's central images and themes. For example, the repetition of "flowers" draws constant attention to the springtime abundance that seems to heighten the widow's sense of loss. Even the repeated word "them" refers to flowers both times, suggesting that the widow can't help but notice the flowers constantly—even as she claims to "forget[]" them immediately (line 19).

METER

As a free verse poem, "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" has no meter. However, its lines are chopped into roughly even lengths (mostly four to seven syllables). Combined with near-constant enjambment, these short lines make the widow's speech sound halting, as if she's speaking with great effort through her pain. In other words, the line breaks mirror the way she's been *emotionally* broken up by grief.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse, so it has no rhyme scheme. Williams was known for his innovative and experimental use of free verse, which he saw as a way of departing from traditional European forms and establishing a distinctively American style of poetry.

However, four lines in the poem (lines 10, 11, 24, and 27) end with the same word: "flowers." (Similarly, the word "them" appears at the ends of lines 18 and 28, both times referring to flowers.) This repetition, which could be classified as identical rhyme, helps convey the sheer abundance of the springtime flowers. Their vitality and abundance contrast poignantly with the widow's listlessness and loss.

SPEAKER

The poem is a dramatic monologue, meaning that its speaker is a character separate from the poet. The title identifies this speaker as a "Widow" grieving in the "Springtime." She has lost her husband after "Thirtyfive years" of marriage (or of living together, at least—see lines 7-8) and is now facing her first spring without him. "This year," unlike in previous years, the rebirth of grass, flowers, and so on leaves her numbly indifferent, as if a "cold fire" is "clos[ing] round" her (lines 5-6).

In other words, she's too depressed and "Sorrow[ful]" to enjoy the season: "the grief in [her] heart / is stronger than" the natural splendor around her (lines 1 and 15-16). She hasn't lost all her close family: she still has a "son," who describes some "trees of white flowers" he's seen, perhaps in an attempt to lift her spirits (lines 20-24). However, she remains inconsolable. The final lines of the poem (lines 25-28) describe her wish to "sink into [a] marsh": an expression of deep melancholy and possibly suicidal despair.

SETTING

The poem takes place in and around the speaker's "own yard," in a rural or suburban setting full of "trees" and "flowers" (lines 10, 11, etc.). As the title indicates, the season is "Springtime." Although "Sorrow is my own yard" (line 1) may be partly a metaphor, it also suggests that the speaker's literal yard, with its abundance of blooming plant life, is causing her sorrow.

The landscape surrounding the speaker includes "grass" (line 2), at least one "plumtree" (line 9), at least one "cherry" tree (line 12), "bushes" with "yellow" and "red" flowers (lines 13-14), "meadows" (line 21), "woods" that include "trees of white flowers" (lines 22-24), and a "marsh" near the woods (line 28). Overall, the description suggests a beautiful countryside—one that the speaker's grief prevents her from enjoying.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Widow's Lament in Springtime" appears in the collection *Sour Grapes* (1921). This volume features several of William Carlos Williams's most frequently anthologized poems, including "Queen-Ann's-Lace" and "The Great Figure."

The poem's springtime setting also anticipates Williams's most groundbreaking book, *Spring and All* (1923), published two years later. The prose sections of *Spring and All* provide a kind of manifesto for Williams's poetry. Throughout, he praises the

imagination and the power of language to create the world anew, rather than simply describe it. He writes at one point: "To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination." The best-known poems from this collection, including Poem I ("Spring and All (By the road to the contagious hospital)") and Poem XXII (a.k.a. "The Red Wheelbarrow"), exemplify Williams's distinctive style, with its intense focus on concrete images.

Williams was a leading poet of modernism, an early 20th-century movement that encouraged experimentation across a variety of arts and genres. Modernist poets rejected what they saw as the sentimentality of 19th-century Romantic and Victorian poetry in favor of a more objective style. Largely abandoning rhyme and meter in favor of free verse, they sought to portray their contemporary world through new forms of poetic expression.

Williams was initially associated with Imagism, a movement in American and European poetry that favored clear, precise language and sharp, powerful images. An early champion of this movement was the American modernist Ezra Pound, who helped Williams get published and heavily influenced his early poetry. Though Williams later abandoned the movement, its principles continued to influence his style.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Widow's Lament in Springtime" appeared in 1921, a few years after World War I (1914-1918). Those who lived through the war had witnessed death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Additionally, the "Spanish flu" pandemic had killed millions of people, including an estimated 500,000 to 850,000 Americans, between 1918 and 1920. This memory would have been fresh in the minds of Williams and his contemporaries.

The widow in the poem never explains her husband's cause of death. Illness is certainly a possibility (as is the war, if he was an older veteran who married young), but it's impossible to say for sure. Regardless, the poem appeared at a time when the world was grappling with mass death events and their resulting "Sorrow."

One poem that captured the ethos of this dark time was T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," published in December 1922. Instantly hailed as a modernist masterpiece, the poem remains celebrated for its challenging, elusive style and grim outlook on the state of civilization. "The Widow's Lament in Springtime," published a year before Eliot's poem, shares its mournful attitude, as well as its insight into the way springtime can depress the grieving. ("The Waste Land" famously begins: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land.") By contrast, *Spring and All*, published months *after* "The Waste Land," is in many ways a reaction against Eliot's bleakness. Whereas Eliot's poem pessimistically depicts the world's harsh realities, *Spring and All* holds out the possibility of recovery and renewal.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Williams Documentary — Watch a film about William Carlos Williams from the USA: Poetry documentary series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es7YEqtIQSQ)
- WCW on Film — A documentary about Williams from the Voices and Visions series. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Du1DJli1_jY)
- An Introduction to the Poet — A brief introduction to Williams's poetry, including "The Widow's Lament in Springtime." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/92531/william-carlos-williams-101-58a72eec11bed)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Williams reading "The Widow's Lament in Springtime." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75672/the-widows-lament-in-springtime)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A brief biography of William Carlos Williams, courtesy of Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/william-carlos-williams)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS POEMS

- Landscape with the Fall of Icarus
- Raleigh Was Right
- Spring and All (By the road to the contagious hospital)
- The Red Wheelbarrow
- This Is Just To Say

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*The Widow's Lament in Springtime.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 May 2022. Web. 10 Jun 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*The Widow's Lament in Springtime.*" LitCharts LLC, May 25, 2022. Retrieved June 10, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-carlos-williams/the-widow-s-lament-in-springtime.