Critical Literary Studies

P-ISSN: 2676-699X E-ISSN: 2716-9928

Vol. VIII, No. 2, Series 16

Spring and Summer 2026

CLS ACADEMIC JOURNAL https://cls.uok.ac.ir

UNIVERSITY OF KURDISTAN https://uok.ac.ir

Article Type: Original Research

Page Numbers: 1-18

Article History:

Received: 22 May 2025

Accepted: 19 January 2026

Published: 8 May 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22034/cls.2026.64313

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The Coexistence of Contrasting Forces: An Analysis of Selected Poetry of William Carlos Williams through Chaos Theory

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Abstract: Chaos theory, a branch of critical theory, has increasingly influenced discussions in both the sciences and the humanities by emphasizing nonlinear, unpredictable, yet patterned systems. This study applies this framework to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, whose deceptively simple verse often resists conventional interpretation. It argues that Williams' poetry, frequently regarded as fragmentary or chaotic, embodies underlying structures of order and interconnection, revealing a coexistence of heterogeneous elements: ordinary details that, when viewed through the lens of chaos theory, disclose systematic patterns. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles' interpretation of chaos theory, the paper closely analyzes three poems, "This Is Just to Say," "The Red Wheelbarrow," and "Classic Scene," to explore themes of creation and destruction, cyclical dependence, and the complex dynamics hidden beneath seemingly trivial scenes. By integrating chaos theory into literary analysis, this study demonstrates that Williams' work transforms surface-level disorder into deeper coherence. In doing so, it proposes a critical model for reading modernist poetry, one that avoids reducing it to either pure fragmentation or rigid order. The conclusion reached is that Williams' art affirms a modern aesthetic in which instability is not a threat to meaning but a generative condition for the creation of new forms of significance.

Keywords: Modernist Poetry; Butterfly Effect; Fractals; Order and Disorder; Nonlinearity.

Citation: Esfandiari Mehr, M. R., and Taghizadeh, A. "The Coexistence of Contrasting Forces: An Analysis of Selected Poetry of William Carlos Williams through Chaos Theory", *Critical Literary Studies*, 8, 2, 2026, 1-18.

1. Introduction

William Carlos Williams, the American poet and physician, revitalized modern poetry by capturing the seemingly chaotic yet deeply interconnected patterns of life. Known for his concise style and vivid imagery, Williams subverted Victorian poetic conventions by creating works that, while deceptively simple on the surface, contain multiple layers of meaning. His poems function as complex systems: they may appear chaotic at first glance, but closer examination reveals subtle patterns of order. In Williams' poetry, pure chaos does not exist; rather, order and disorder continually coexist, reflecting the dynamics of complex systems.

The central problem addressed in this study is the paradox within Williams' poetry: how works that initially seem fragmented, nonlinear, and chaotic nonetheless reveal hidden structures of coherence and significance. Despite their brevity and apparent simplicity, Williams' poems mirror the nonlinear, patterned phenomena studied in chaos theory. Drawing on concepts such as fractals and the butterfly effect, this research explores how Williams intertwines creation and destruction, simplicity and complexity, to depict a world where chance and structure are inextricably bound.

This study is guided by two central questions: (1) How can chaos theory, particularly its principles of fractals and the butterfly effect, illuminate the structural and thematic dimensions of Williams' poetry? (2) In what ways does Williams' work reveal an underlying order within apparent poetic chaos, and what does this suggest about modernist poetics more broadly?

To explore these questions, the study analyzes three short poems by Williams: "This Is Just to Say", "The Red Wheelbarrow", and "Classic Scene". Each poem, while fragmentary and deceptively ordinary, serves as a microcosm of the untidy yet interconnected processes of life. Ultimately, this research argues that Williams' poetry is not merely an aesthetic experiment, but a deliberate poetic representation of the complex dynamics of chaos and order in human existence.

2. Literature Review

Only a limited number of studies have examined modern poetry through the lens of chaos theory. Nevertheless, several works have provided critical groundwork for the present study, which investigates the embedded coexistence of order and chaos in Williams's poetry. In "Williams' 'Spring and All' and the Progress of Poetry," J. Hillis Miller offers an insightful exploration of the relationship between Williams's poems and their interpretation. Miller discusses the concept of progress in the humanities with particular

reference to Spring and All, in which the poems are, as he notes, "dispersed among passages of prose … and some of which are Williams' fullest statements of his theory of poetry" (415). His analysis provides a foundation for interpreting Williams's poetry through modern critical theory. For Miller, progress in the humanities is nonlinear—a quality that parallels Williams's poetic method, which emphasizes spontaneity and immediacy. This perspective resonates with chaos theory, which foregrounds the unpredictable behavior of dynamic systems. Williams's fragmented structures and abrupt shifts reflect the chaotic elements of both nature and human experience. Miller's work therefore offers a conceptual basis for scholars interested in tracing features of chaos theory in Williams's poetry.

In "Chaos and Order: The Cycle of Life and Art in Williams' 'Spring and All'," Richard J. Morgan examines selected sections of Spring and All as a unified poetic project. Morgan addresses the complex interplay of chaos and order as Williams presents it in relation to the cycles of life and art. He argues that the web interlinking Williams's sense of chaos and order mirrors the instability and contradictions of existence itself. Morgan further explains how Williams's innovative use of form and language enacts the tension between chaos and order. The poem's fragmented structure, disjointed imagery, and shifting perspectives impart a flexible, unpredictable quality akin to natural disorder, while the poet's precise diction and deliberate clarity impose coherence upon this chaos. Morgan also highlights moments of fleeting stasis, where temporary pauses interrupt perception and create thematic bifurcation. This "cyclical nature of perception" suggests that reality is in flux, generated through the tension of singular moments. Ultimately, Morgan contends that Spring and All fuses chaos and order as a metaphor for the creative process in Williams's art.

In "The Structure of Perception in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams: A Stylistic Analysis," James Paul Gee argues that Williams's work embodies principles of chaos theory through its sustained focus on perception and artistic form. Similarly, Brian McHale's "Poetry as Prosthesis" briefly discusses the "machine poetry" of Williams, Jackson Mac Low, Harry Mathews, and others. McHale maintains that these poets employ linguistic mechanisms such as anagrams, acrostics, and algorithms to construct poetry, thereby positioning language as a type of prosthesis. His argument highlights the relationship between technology and modern poetics, suggesting that just as technology evolves, literary artists deploy artificial procedures to generate poetic innovation.

In “Interpreting Chaos: The Paradigm of Chaotics and New Critical Theory,” Kenneth McLeod illustrates the challenges inherent in chaos theory through the example of weather prediction, noting that a winter day is not necessarily colder than a summer day. He emphasizes that chaos studies focus on two related concerns: identifying hidden order within chaotic systems and tracing the emergence of order from those systems (43).

Jason Menzin’s “Cubism in Words: Broken Pieces in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams” further explores Williams’s poetry as a mirror of lived experience. Menzin argues that Williams conveys affirmative visions through a dynamic imagination that reconciles seemingly incompatible thoughts and feelings. He likens each poem to a cubist fragment of a larger whole, noting that because each whole contains subparts—and each subpart can itself be further divided—the resulting complexity resists predictability. For Menzin, the integrity of Williams’s poems reflects a wholeness grounded in broad knowledge, yet one that remains fragile despite its apparent cohesion.

In “Readings in Temporal Poetics: Four Poems by William Carlos Williams,” Richard Cureton employs a temporal framework grounded in chaos theory to analyze Williams’s “Poem.” Cureton examines the poet’s manipulation of time and prosody to reveal the underlying chaos of creation. He highlights the temporal and linguistic dynamics of the poem, arguing that Williams develops a unique temporal poetics that captures the fleeting, unstable nature of experience and language.

Tony Barnstone’s “William Carlos Williams and the Cult of the New” (2019) situates Williams within avant-garde ideology, emphasizing its celebration of novelty in a modern techno-scientific context. Barnstone observes that contradictions within avant-garde thought complicate alternatives to religious belief. He argues that Williams responds to these contradictions through linguistic innovation, presenting creation and destruction as coexisting forces. In Williams’s poetry, order and chaos intertwine, embodying the dynamism characteristic of the avant-garde.

Jake Young’s “Poetic Origins: Revisiting William Carlos Williams’s ‘The Poem as a Field of Action’ and Mapping the Building Blocks of Poetry” investigates intersections between poetry and contemporary scientific theories, including quantum mechanics and speculative realism. Young’s analysis of Williams’s 1948 lecture underscores the poet’s call for a new poetic style aligned with scientific advancements, particularly relativity theory. This approach parallels chaos theory’s emphasis on continual change within dynamic systems. Young concludes that Williams’s poetry functions as a “field of action” defined by granularity, indeterminacy, and relationality—features that echo chaos theory’s principle that underlying patterns can render seemingly random systems systematic.

3. Theoretical Framework

Corliss Lamont observes that Auguste Comte "used the term 'positivism' not as the opposite of 'negative' but as meaning scientifically certain or assured" (47). English positivism, however, placed even greater emphasis on the authority of experimental science and the necessity of its practical application in human life. As Lamont further explains, "the versatile John Stuart Mill developed and included in his philosophy of Utilitarianism the more scientific aspects of Comte's work, shunning its religious and mystical elements" (48).

In the 1890s, the King of Sweden's prize was awarded to Henri Poincaré for his groundbreaking work on "complex dynamics," particularly the "n-body problem." The award recognized not a completed solution but the foundational insights Poincaré offered into celestial mechanics. This aspect of his work contributed significantly to the later emergence of chaos theory. By demonstrating the limitations of Newtonian equations in resolving nonlinear problems, Poincaré undermined the positivist claim to absolute scientific certainty. Although initially resisted for challenging the dominant intellectual paradigm, his ideas eventually gained acceptance. Nonetheless, research on complex dynamics remained relatively dormant in the West until the advent of digital computers in the 1960s and 1970s, which made such inquiries computationally feasible.

The decisive breakthrough came with Edward Lorenz's 1963 meteorological research, which established chaos theory as a distinct scientific field. Widely regarded as the founder of modern chaos theory, Lorenz sought to identify the fundamental properties of chaotic systems by modeling weather changes over time. Initially, he believed that weather fluctuations could be predicted using three nonlinear differential equations. For Lorenz, the nonlinearity of weather patterns was essential, for it implied uniqueness and non-repetition. Yet his experiments produced far more unpredictability than expected. After feeding twelve tentative patterns into his computer, he found that none reliably predicted future weather outcomes.

Determined to refine his predictive models, Lorenz altered his methodology. Instead of restarting a sequence from the beginning, he began from its midpoint. He entered a number generated during an earlier run and left the computer to process the sequence. Upon returning, he discovered that the new output differed completely from the original. While the first sequence appeared relatively stable, the second was markedly divergent and chaotic.

Lorenz soon identified the cause: the computer stored numbers to six decimal places, but to save paper he had entered only three in the second run. In the first sequence, the number had been 0.605127; in the second, 0.605. He assumed that omitting the final three digits would have no significant effect. The result proved otherwise: a minute variation in initial conditions produced a radically different outcome. This insight became known as the "butterfly effect." N. Katherine Hayles describes Lorenz's discovery: "when he started the mid-point run …, he was beginning from a very slightly different place than where the run had stopped. This small initial discrepancy was amplified until the final result was a pattern quite different from the original. Carried into weather forecasting, this result implied that a sea gull flapping its wings on a California beach could affect the occurrence of snow on Wall Street" (147).

During the same period, Benoit Mandelbrot advanced chaos theory through his development of fractal geometry. His identification of the "Mandelbrot set" revealed that phenomena appearing rough, irregular, or chaotic in fact exhibit underlying order. Calling himself "the fractalist," Mandelbrot defined fractals as complex geometric shapes displaying self-similarity across scales. His research demonstrated how fractal geometry profoundly reshapes our understanding of irregular and seemingly unpredictable natural forms.

Reflecting on such scientific transformations, Hayles argued that "where the eighteenth century saw a clockwork mechanism and the nineteenth century an organic entity, the late twentieth century is likely to see a turbulent flow" (143). Inspired by this discourse, she began interpreting literature through the lens of chaos theory, suggesting that the "turbulent flow" of postmodern culture may be traced more readily in literary texts than in other cultural domains. Hayles conceptualizes literature as a chaotic system structured by an interplay of order and disorder, regularity and randomness. For her, the traditional binary of "order versus chaos" fails to capture the complexity of literary texts, which resist linear interpretation and embrace indeterminacy.

Hayles also emphasizes that her use of chaos differs from that of natural scientists. Whereas scientists investigate physical phenomena, she extends the concept into culture and literature. To her, chaos is not mere disorder but a rich source of information and complexity. She argues that chaos reveals an unpredictably open universe, challenging deterministic assumptions by showing how small variations in a system's initial conditions can yield disproportionately large effects (3). This shift marks a departure from traditional linear thought and a growing recognition of inherent unpredictability.

Hayles underscores that science and culture exhibit comparable structures. In both domains, complex systems demonstrate how minute initial causes can produce disproportionate consequences. For her, science cannot be separated from culture: “Like literature, science is always already cultural and cannot be otherwise” (174). The interdependence she identifies highlights the need to situate scientific thought within its cultural matrix, thereby opening space for interdisciplinary dialogue between the sciences and the humanities.

Simultaneously, critical theory was reshaping the humanities, introducing fragmented perspectives and evolving analytical methodologies. Rooted in a strong sense of negation, critical theory sought to question cultural norms and dismantle entrenched structures. In this context, the overlaps between critical theory and chaos theory become apparent. Both foreground instability, complexity, and unpredictability, and both resist the positivist impulse to seek fixed meanings or final certainties. Literature, understood as a dynamic system open to multiple interpretations, became a site where the deterministic logic of earlier criticism gave way to interpretive practices attuned to flux and contingency.

Other scholars have likewise explored the intersections of chaos and culture. Gordon S. Slethaug investigates how contemporary novels embody chaotic dynamics, while Seamus Lagan and David Paddy highlight convergences between scientific and humanistic approaches to complexity. Their work reflects a broader scholarly momentum that positions chaos as a central paradigm across disciplines, extending beyond the particular concerns of the present study.

4. Analysis

The authors of the present study encountered considerable challenges while conducting this research, largely due to the scarcity of studies examining English poetry through the lens of chaos theory. Yet this very scarcity emphasizes the critical importance of initiating new dialogues that extend beyond traditional literary frameworks. By bringing chaos theory into conversation with Williams’ poetry, this study demonstrates that modern poetry benefits substantially from interdisciplinary inquiry. Chaos theory not only offers a lens for observing poetic structures but also illuminates the generative entanglement of disorder and order within the aesthetic act itself. The authors thus hope that this study will inspire other scholars to expand the scope of chaos studies to include poetic analysis, where the interplay of complexity, unpredictability, and emergent order offers substantial analytical insight.

Williams' concise poem "This Is Just to Say" initially appears deceptively simple; beneath its seemingly plain diction, however, lies a nuanced network of human and formal relationships that mirrors the complex, often unpredictable patterns central to chaos theory. As Christopher Beach observes, Williams remains "receptive to the ideas of the Imagist movement" (95). Yet, unlike many Imagist poets, who drew heavily on rural imagery and classical restraint, Williams located his poetic material in the ordinary, urban, and domestic environments of New York. Immersed in the aesthetic life of the city—through museums, galleries, and avant-garde literary circles—he learned to reconceive art as something rooted in immediacy and the quotidian. In this poem, the setting is deliberately modest: a kitchen, a refrigerator, and a stolen breakfast. The speaker confesses to eating the plums reserved by another, offers a succinct explanation, and concludes with a playful plea for forgiveness:

4.1. "This Is Just to Say": Creation and Destruction Intertwined

> I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox
>
> and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast
>
> Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold

The stripped-down diction, short lines, and clipped phrasing exemplify Williams' principle of "no ideas but in things." As The Norton Anthology of American Literature emphasizes, Williams believed that the social and aesthetic force of poetry arises not from abstract generalizations but from the careful accumulation of precise, tangible details (Baym et al. 1934). In this context, the adjectives of the closing stanza—"delicious," "sweet," "cold"—invite the reader to engage sensually, while the repetition of sibilant sounds produces a soft, lingering cadence. What initially seems childlike in its simplicity is, in fact, a meticulously crafted experiment demonstrating how the smallest components—words, sounds, and sensory triggers—generate profound aesthetic effects.

Chaos theory becomes particularly relevant in the poem's dramatization of disruption within an ostensibly stable system. The act of consuming the plums destabilizes the fragile equilibrium of domestic order. As Cureton observes, "the speaker is happy to bend social and personal propriety in order to satisfy individual desire" (192). This minor transgression initiates what chaos theory defines as a nonlinear dynamic: a small disturbance produces consequences that exceed its apparent scale. The speaker's confession unsettles relational structures, provoking a process of apology and reconciliation. Cureton further notes that the poem's structure—its fragmented phrasing,

sensory engagement, and conversational tone—constructs a "whole scenario of transgression … [which] is a relativistic one" (194). In this reading, order and disorder do not simply oppose each other; rather, they oscillate, generating a cycle in which violation and forgiveness are mutually constitutive.

Within chaos theory, disorder is not inherently destructive but is also generative. Santesso and Rumrich illustrate this point in discussing Milton, observing that in his cosmology, chaos functions as a creative force. They argue that God employed the same creative formula twice: in forming Adam from dust and in creating the Universe from chaos (121). A similar dynamic operates in Williams' poem, where the disruption of order forms the basis for creation. The seemingly trivial act of eating plums evolves into a meditation on desire, intimacy, and relational ethics. This process mirrors the butterfly effect: a minor perturbation within a system can yield consequences far exceeding its apparent scale. Thus, a minor domestic transgression becomes artistically resonant, transforming an ordinary moment into enduring aesthetic significance.

The poem may also be interpreted through the concept of strange attractors—patterns in chaotic systems that appear random superficially but reveal recognizable order when observed holistically. Williams' fragmented, conversational lines gravitate around recurrent attractors: confession, pleasure, and forgiveness. These motifs establish emergent order within apparent disorder, suggesting that poetry, like chaotic systems, produces coherence organically rather than through rigid design. The repetition of sensory descriptors— "delicious," "sweet," "cold"—acts as attractors, guiding the poem toward closure while embedding it in a recurring cycle of desire and consequence.

Holsapple asserts that Williams' poetic imagination constitutes a "realm of sovereignty" (19), wherein the mind reconfigures reality independently of external constraints. In "This Is Just to Say," this sovereignty manifests in the transformation of an ordinary note into a layered aesthetic object. The speaker's impulsive act, while seemingly trivial, inaugurates a poetic event in which intimacy and disruption coexist. Williams' imagination does not merely mirror reality; it constructs a dynamic system in which order emerges from chaos. What begins as a simple confession ultimately evolves into a paradoxical celebration of both violation and reconciliation.

Fractals, fundamental to chaos theory, illuminate the poem's structural complexity through self-similarity—the recurrence of patterns across multiple scales. The poem demonstrates fractal qualities in the way its smallest elements—words, sounds, and gestures—reflect broader thematic and emotional dynamics. For instance, the sensual

language in the final stanza, describing the plums as simultaneously "sweet" and "cold," encapsulates the paradoxical pleasure and discomfort of transgression. Each minute detail mirrors the larger whole, suggesting that human experience, like fractal geometry, is inherently recursive, with meaning unfolding across interconnected layers.

"This Is Just to Say" condenses the central paradox of chaos theory into twelve lines: order and disorder are inseparable, each generating the other. The sweetness of the plums is intensified precisely because their consumption constitutes a minor violation; forgiveness acquires significance against the backdrop of this minor betrayal. Williams' minimalism transcends superficial simplicity, capturing instead the intricate, unpredictable interconnections of human life. Viewed through the lens of chaos theory, the poem functions as a microcosm of complex systems: the smallest actions reverberate outward, intertwining and replicating to form elaborate structures of meaning and emotion.

In this way, Williams' poem exemplifies the generative potential of chaos within art. What initially appears to be a casual kitchen note also operates as a meditation on the ways disorder fosters renewal, intimacy intersects with disruption, and meaning arises from unpredictability. Framed in this light, Williams does not merely document domestic moments; he models the complex, chaotic patterns that underlie life itself.

4.2. "The Red Wheelbarrow": A Whole Loop

so much depends / upon
a red wheel / barrow
glazed with rain / water
beside the white / chickens

Christopher Beach contends that Williams produced a body of poetry comparable in significance to that of any American poet of his era, celebrating local American life while embracing experimental form and language (93). "The Red Wheelbarrow" exemplifies modernist innovation, fusing simple diction with fragmented structure to elevate an ordinary moment into the extraordinary. Through minimalist technique and radical enjambment, Williams compels readers to pause and reconsider the significance of seemingly mundane objects upon which "so much" depends.

The poem unfolds across four uneven couplets, distilling experience to its bare essentials. Yet this apparent simplicity conceals deliberate strangeness. Williams fractures linguistic expectation: "depends" is isolated from "upon," the compound "wheelbarrow" is split, and conventional collocations, such as "rain water" and "white

chickens," are interrupted by gaps. This fragmentation obstructs seamless reading, forcing attention to both form and content. In doing so, the poem enacts what chaos theory identifies as nonlinear dynamics, where meaning emerges not from linear progression but from disruption and recombination.

The subject matter itself is mundane: a red wheelbarrow, glazed with rainwater, stands beside some chickens. Yet Williams' technical innovations transform this moment into a subtle meditation. The definite article in "the red wheelbarrow" presumes familiarity, as if the object were known to the reader, while the description renders it freshly strange. The ordinary becomes refracted through a new perceptual lens, resonating with chaos theory's insight that systems—be they poems, ecosystems, or social networks—reveal hidden complexity when examined from unconventional perspectives.

The poem's enjambments amplify this effect. Each line break halts and redirects the flow of sense, producing a rhythm of pause and continuation. Readers must repeatedly stop, recalibrate, and restart, generating a recursive loop of perception. Initially, the scene may appear fragmented, even chaotic, yet gradually a coherent order emerges: the wheelbarrow, rainwater, and chickens coalesce into a recognizable tableau. The text enacts a feedback loop akin to those central in chaos theory, where disruption generates reorganization and disorder feeds back into structure.

Color imagery further intensifies this loop. The juxtaposition of red and white produces a striking visual contrast, imbuing the ordinary objects with symbolic resonance. Red suggests vitality, energy, and labor, while white evokes simplicity and purity. Together, they reinforce the idea that beauty resides in even the most quotidian objects. The rainwater adds texture and a sense of renewal, highlighting the cyclical rhythms of agricultural life. The wheelbarrow, as a tool of labor, underscores humanity's dependence on work and the interconnection of human activity with natural processes.

Consequently, the overarching theme centers on the significance of the ordinary. Williams insists that life's richness is located in its smallest, often overlooked details. The wheelbarrow, far from trivial, embodies the dignity of everyday work and the intricate interdependence of human and natural systems. The poem itself mirrors a fractal structure: each detail reflects broader patterns, revealing the emergence of order from apparent chaos. This dynamic finds resonance in Williams' Paterson, where he writes:

> It is the ignorant sun / rising in the slot of / hollow suns risen, so that never in this / world will a man live well in his body / save dying …; yet that is / the design. Renews himself / thereby …

Joel Osborne Conarroe interprets this passage as suggesting that death underwrites life, functioning as "the mother of action," allowing renewal through negation (44–45). The Red Wheelbarrow operates in a similar fashion: absence, fragmentation, or ignorance is transformed into creation. Out of disorder arises structure, paralleling the poem's fractured form coalescing into luminous simplicity.

Chaos theory further elucidates this process. Edward Lorenz's butterfly effect proposes that minute perturbations—such as a butterfly flapping its wings—can produce massive consequences elsewhere. In Williams' poem, the wheelbarrow, a seemingly minor object, assumes disproportionate significance. It is not merely a farm implement but the axis on which "so much" depends: sustenance, labor, community, and survival. By concentrating attention on a single object, Williams reveals the vast, interconnected networks extending from it.

The Red Wheelbarrow dramatizes the principle of interconnectedness fundamental to chaotic systems. Each element—the wheelbarrow, rainwater, and chickens—appears discrete but is in fact entwined in a larger whole. Minor variations ripple through the system, altering perception of the entire scene. The poem enacts a paradox: fragmentation begets unity, and simplicity conceals complexity. Seen through the lens of chaos theory, it is not merely a pastoral vignette but a dynamic system of meaning. Recursive form, chromatic contrast, and symbolic resonance demonstrate how small disturbances generate new orders, highlighting how the ordinary can reveal profound interconnections. Williams shows that within the mundane lies the pulse of the universe.

4.3. "Classic Scene": Meaning Conveyed through a Balance of Dis(order)

> A power-house / in the shape of / a red brick chair / 90 feet high
> on the seat of which / sit the figures / of two metal / stacks–aluminum–
> commanding an area / of squalid shacks / side by side– / from one of which
> buff smoke / streams while under / a grey sky / the other remains

In Classic Scene, the poetic persona navigates a subtler form of chaos than that in This Is Just to Say, and the symbolic use of color is less immediately decipherable than in The Red Wheelbarrow. Nevertheless, the poem conveys meaning through a delicate equilibrium of order and disorder: structure is present where potential disruption lurks, and apparent chaos gradually gives way to emergent patterns. Chaos theory illuminates the poem's nonlinear dynamics and the complex structures shaping both perception and form, revealing hidden depth beneath its apparent simplicity.

Williams' poetry consistently emphasizes clarity and simplicity, focusing on the immediate and the concrete. Classic Scene exemplifies this approach. At first glance, the imagery—a towering industrial structure, two smokestacks, surrounding shacks, and a gray sky—appears straightforward. Yet careful examination uncovers multiple layers of meaning. The poem captures a precise physical landscape while simultaneously exploring human perception, interaction, and interpretation of the relationship between industrial and natural elements. By emphasizing everyday subjects, Williams illustrates how the extraordinary can reside in the mundane, often unnoticed. This approach aligns with a core modernist principle: uncovering resonance and complexity within ordinary life.

Critics have long admired Williams' skill in evoking vivid imagery with linguistic economy, evident throughout Classic Scene. Ordinary objects—a brick structure, aluminum stacks, nearby shacks—are rendered with precision, elevating the mundane to the extraordinary. This attention to detail resonates with chaos theory's principle of dynamic systems, where simple elements interact to generate intricate patterns. In Classic Scene, the observer's engagement with the scene shapes emergent meaning, underscoring the nonlinear nature of perception and interpretation.

The poem explores the interdependence of natural and industrial systems. The "power-house" dominates as an industrial presence, while the "squalid shacks" emphasize human vulnerability. The two smokestacks—one emitting "buff smoke," the other dormant—illustrate uneven responses within an interconnected system, exemplifying sensitivity to initial conditions. This contrast highlights the unpredictability of systems in real-world contexts, showing how components that appear similar may behave divergently, revealing the dynamic interplay of order and disorder embedded in the landscape.

Williams' formal innovations reinforce the poem's thematic concerns. Eschewing conventional structure, he uses enjambment and strategic line breaks to create a rhythm that mirrors the act of observation. Each pause invites reflection, slowing perception deliberately. The fragmentation mirrors chaotic behavior: though initially disjointed, sustained engagement reveals underlying patterns. Thus, the poem's structure models cognitive processes of perception and interpretation, showing how order emerges through attentive interaction with complexity. Brian McHale underscores this reading, noting that Classic Scene,

> "holds the mirror up to the powerhouse in more than one sense. On the one hand, the relationship between them is straightforwardly representational: the verbal text represents the object-machine in the sense of describing or evoking it. But their relationship is also one of modeling: in the precision-engineered working of its component parts (neutral diction, short grammatical units, compact lines), Williams's small machine models the machine qualities of the powerhouse, but on a miniature scale" (2).

McHale emphasizes that the poem is simultaneously symbolic and functional: its structure enacts the mechanical and dynamic qualities of the industrial object itself, producing a linguistic microcosm of the industrial landscape.

Beach observes that Williams' early twentieth-century work aimed "to capture a sense of lived reality and of the particularity of the physical world, in aesthetic terms" (95). Initially influenced by Imagist principles—precision, clarity, and economy of language—Williams diverged by emphasizing urban and semi-industrial scenes often dismissed as unworthy subjects. From a chaos theory perspective, these grounded depictions reveal the underlying complexity of dynamic systems, where interactions among simple elements generate emergent patterns, exposing coherence within apparent disorder.

The fusion of natural and industrial imagery embodies a postmodern sensibility, dissolving traditional boundaries between art and everyday life. By integrating the powerhouse and surrounding shacks into a continuum of observation, Williams invites readers to reconsider assumptions about reality. Rather than relying on grandeur, he demonstrates that aesthetic experience arises from attentive engagement with ordinary environments. Classic Scene thus exemplifies self-organizing systems, where structure emerges organically from dynamic interplay—an essential principle in chaos theory.

Experimental poetry often risks interpretive collapse, particularly when apparent simplicity conceals deeper complexity. Employing chaos theory enables critics to uncover hidden structures, focusing on nonlinear dynamics, emergent patterns, and feedback mechanisms within the text. The "buff smoke" rising from one stack, contrasted with the stillness of the other, exemplifies how minor differences produce significant consequences, akin to the butterfly effect. Similarly, the "90 feet high" chair-like structure functions as a dominant system element, while surrounding human dwellings appear fragile, highlighting sensitivity to initial conditions and the outsized influence of minor variations. This approach clarifies the interplay between stability and change in poetic form and meaning.

Chaos theory foregrounds emergence and self-organization, key to understanding Classic Scene. Meaning arises from interactions among simple components: the brick structure, smokestacks, and shacks. Readers grasp significance by observing these interrelations, illustrating how complex patterns develop from interconnections rather than imposed design. The grey sky and dilapidated surroundings evoke instability, yet emergent coherence persists. Chaos does not eliminate structure; it fosters a dynamic, context-dependent order.

Nonlinear dynamics manifest in perceptual and interpretive processes. Each encounter with the scene triggers cascading insights, showing observation as an active force in meaning-making. Minor details—the smokestacks' positioning, smoke color, and contrast between industrial and residential forms—interact to shift perception, highlighting the sensitivity of interpretation to initial conditions. Williams' text thus embodies chaotic system characteristics: simultaneously stable and unstable, local and global, simple and complex.

Classic Scene ultimately demonstrates complexity, unpredictability, and emergent patterns—core features of chaos theory. Industrial power and human vulnerability coexist in a dynamic web, where minor variations can have disproportionate effects. The poem's imagery and structure invite careful, participatory reading, emphasizing the observer's role in meaning construction. As Roghayeh Farsi notes, chaos-based analysis offers a "systematic way to analyze a literary text … seeking strange attractors, which disrupt the poem's system, and then looking for cementing order that prevents total collapse" (10). In Williams' work, ordinary and industrial, passive and active, ephemeral and enduring elements converge to form a microcosm reflecting life's inherent unpredictability and creative potential, unveiling a poetic order emerging from chaos.

5. Conclusion

While chaos theory originated within physics and mathematics, its applicability extends far beyond the sciences, offering valuable perspectives for literary analysis. This study, by examining the technical and thematic features of three short poems by William Carlos Williams—namely, "This Is Just to Say," "The Red Wheelbarrow," and "Classic Scene"—has sought to demonstrate how his poetry enacts a dynamic tension between chaos and order. What may initially appear as simplicity or formal disorder—manifested in disjointed lineation, fragmented syntax, and minimalist diction—unfolds into a profound structural coherence when interpreted through the lens of chaos theory. This approach reveals how Williams elevates the ordinary and mundane into moments of heightened intensity, embedding within them recursive loops, fractal patterns, and butterfly effects characteristic of complex systems. Consequently, the poems illustrate how minor textual variations or subtle linguistic decisions can generate cascading interpretive effects, reflecting the behavior of chaotic systems observed in nature.

This study underscores that the implications of chaos theory for literary analysis extend beyond formal considerations. A central insight of chaos theory is the active role of the observer in shaping outcomes, a concept that resonates profoundly with the nature of poetry. In Williams' work, meaning does not reside solely within the text but emerges through the interplay between reader and poem, speaker and world. The immediacy of Williams' imagery—the plums eaten from an icebox, the red wheelbarrow glazed with

rain, the industrial powerhouse overshadowing humble shacks—invites the reader's active engagement in constructing significance. Interpretation, therefore, parallels the unpredictable yet patterned processes described by chaos theory: the reader's perception, cultural context, and imaginative participation act as initial conditions that may produce divergent but equally valid readings. A personological approach attentive to the voice and intentions of Williams' speakers further emphasizes this point, revealing how their subjective experiences function as nodes of meaning within broader networks of interrelationships. In doing so, Williams' minimalist poetics enact the participatory dynamics that chaos theory attributes to complex systems, highlighting the fluid and co-creative relationship among text, author, and reader.

Framing Williams' poetry through the prism of chaos theory thus illuminates the deep interconnections between artistic and scientific modes of thought. Williams' ability to render the everyday simultaneously strange and luminous testifies to poetry's enduring engagement with randomness, uncertainty, and processes of becoming. His work demonstrates how art can reveal hidden patterns beneath apparent disorder, encouraging readers to recognize beauty and coherence where they might otherwise perceive only triviality or chaos. By integrating chaos theory into literary criticism, this study not only enriches our understanding of Williams' poetics but also contributes to broader discussions regarding the function of art in an increasingly complex modern world. Like science, literature becomes a mode of disclosure—uncovering emergent truths, exposing interrelated systems, and affirming the generative potential inherent in chaos. Williams' poetics remind us that meaning is never fixed but perpetually unfolding through recursive cycles of perception, interpretation, and re-creation. His poetry captures both the fragility and resilience of life: fleeting moments crystallize into discernible patterns, while the chaotic unpredictability of existence is momentarily contained within the delicate order of verse.

Funding:
There is no funding support.

Authors' Contribution:
The authors have written the article in a complete collaboration.

Conflict of Interests:
This research does not conflict with personal and/or organizational interests.

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