Spring and All (By the road to the contagious

SUMMARY

The speaker describes the road leading up to the hospital, which is filled with contagious diseases. There, beneath a rush of stormy clouds, a cold northeastern wind blows. Further off, there are wide, muddy fields covered with dried-up broken weeds, stagnant puddles, and a few trees.

Along this road, the speaker sees, there are bare trees, bushes, and vines, with dead leaves lying on the ground beneath them.

Spring, the speaker reflects, creeps in slowly, looking stunned. New plants come into the world naked, cold, and unsure about everything except for the fact that they're growing, and that the same old cold wind is blowing around them.

One day, the speaker observes, the grass comes in; the next day, the wild carrot leaves sprout. One by one, spring's plants start to look like themselves. Spring comes to life, revealing the shapes and characters of all these new plants.

But for now, the speaker says, spring looks pretty bleak—but dignified—as it comes back to the world. Even if things look grim now, the plants are going through deep change: they drive their roots into the soil and start to wake up.

THEMES

REBIRTH AND RENEWAL

The speaker of "Spring and All" reflects on the subtle arrival of spring after winter. The poem portrays spring not as a sudden, dramatic change that happens all at once but as a gradual, hard-won renewal following winter's devastation. Though the season at first appears "cold" and "[l]ifeless," its steady process of rebirth is already in motion.

Spring, here, represents more than the literal season: it's also a symbol of hope and rebirth in general. And in illustrating the slow and almost imperceptible struggle by which spring arises from winter's bleakness, the poem speaks to how hope emerges gradually, imperceptibly, and yet inevitably in times of despair.

The poem presents the changes of springtime emerging steadily and progressively from winter's world of death and decay. The early spring of the poem is full of "dried weeds" and "dead, brown leaves" and still features the "cold wind" of winter, for example. In other words, there's no sharp line dividing spring from winter. This continuity between seasons reflects how hope and renewal return not suddenly or dramatically, but bit by bit, incrementally.

Williams also juxtaposes the rebirth of spring with a nearby "contagious hospital"—a place of death and disease. Crucially, it is *out* of this dead and cold environment that the spring of the poem emerges, suggesting how life and renewal slowly but inevitably "spring" even from bleakness and despair.

But just because this process is gradual doesn't mean that it's easy. Rather than treating spring's arrival as a smooth transition from a world of darkness and into one of joyous rebirth, the poem celebrates it as a hard-won triumph over winter's barrenness.

At first, spring is unassuming and fragile. Like winter, it is "lifeless in appearance" and, like a newborn child, "sluggish, / dazed." Its new plants enter the world "naked, / cold, uncertain." The fact that spring's new plants "grip down" with their roots highlights how the newborn life of spring must struggle to establish itself.

The poem also presents this gradual struggle towards renewal taking place out of sight, before one even knows it's happening. The early spring scenery here is not what one would expect, and in fact still looks a lot like winter. Spring usually makes one think of intense, blossoming beauty, but the poem illustrates an early spring filled with "dried weeds," "dead, brown leaves" and plants returning to life not gloriously but with a "stark dignity of / entrance." And yet the poem insists that the "profound change / Has come upon" the plants: the forces that bring on springtime are already at work beneath the earth, where new plant life slowly takes root and struggles to be born.

In stressing that the first steps towards renewal are unseen, the poem suggests how the forces of hope and rebirth may be in motion even when one isn't necessarily aware of them yet. The poem thus offers a reminder and a consolation for times of deep despair: even when things look bleak, hope may already be on its way.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

By the road ...
... standing and fallen

The opening lines of "Spring and All" introduce the poem's setting: a cold, barren road, full of mud and "dried weeds," under a blue sky streaked and spotted with clouds. This is the road to the "contagious hospital," a place for people with dangerous

diseases.

Readers may find this opening odd for a number of reasons. First, few would expect a poem that celebrates the spring to start with imagery of mud, withered plants, and cold air: spring poems traditionally get more excited about bounding lambs and sunshine. It's even stranger for a spring poem to begin with the image of a "contagious hospital," a place of death, disease, and decay.

But early spring does not involve a glorious and sudden transformation, according to the poem. At least on the surface, this spring looks a lot like the gloomy winter which precedes it. The poem implies that there is no sharp line dividing the seasons; rather, one flows continuously into the next. Here, the natural rebirth of spring is not a sudden force that overwhelms or displaces winter. Instead, it grows out gradually and organically from winter's chill.

The same is true, this poem will suggest, of those qualities that winter and spring traditionally symbolize: death and rebirth, despair and hope. Hope doesn't always come bursting suddenly into dark times, the speaker observes, but grows little by little, almost invisibly.

The poem has no regular meter and is written in free verse—a shape that develops as organically as the little plants that the speaker will admire later in the poem. And its frequent enjambments create subtle moments of suspense. Take a look at how that works here:

> [...] the **blue**
> **mottled** clouds driven from **the**
> **northeast**—a cold wind. Beyond, **the**
> **waste** of broad, muddy **fields**
> **brown** with [...]

These continuous, developing lines give the impression of a landscape gradually being revealed—and of spring slowly creeping in. Enjambments like these will continue all through the poem, heightening the reader's anticipation as they wait to find out how spring is to emerge from such a dead landscape.

LINES 7-13

patches of standing ...
... leafless vines—

Looking around the barren early-spring landscape, the speaker notes "standing" or stagnant water. Those still puddles further develop the feeling that the muddy world is holding still, seeming unchanged even as spring creeps in. But "standing water" is also a breeding ground for diseases, echoing the "contagious hospital" of line 1 and further establishing the landscape as a place riddled with illness and decay.

But the poem insists that spring will somehow rise out of this diseased land, suggesting that rebirth can take place even in the bleakest conditions.

Next, the poem zooms in on plant life. The speaker's vivid imagery here evokes the shapes and texture of withered plants, stiff twigs, and dry, brittle leaves and branches: "reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy," "dead, brown" and "leafless," these plants are not exactly images of fresh and abundant new life. These shriveled plants vividly highlight the landscape's bareness and seeming deadness.

This prepares the ground for the surprising declaration that spring is nevertheless already on its way—and supports the poem's larger symbolic point that the forces of hope and renewal may very well be at work, gradually and subtly, even where they are not immediately obvious.

LINES 14-15

Lifeless in appearance, ...
... dazed spring approaches—

Now, the poem makes a plainspoken declaration about the true nature of spring. In an interjection set off by two dashes at the ends of lines 13 and 15, the speaker makes a kind of parenthetical aside, suggesting that spring is secretly on its way *even as* everything seems hopelessly barren and forlorn. This interjection, breaking into the middle of a portrait of a chilly, gloomy landscape, implies that *within* that landscape, the forces of renewal are quietly at work.

The speaker's figurative language here continues to present spring's arrival as deceptive and unassuming. In this poem, spring is not a sudden, glorious, triumphant burst of new vitality. Rather, it is personified as both "sluggish"—lazy and slow-moving—and "dazed"—as befuddled as a newborn.

What's more, the fact that it is "[l]ifeless in appearance" highlights the poem's key point that spring's rebirth, at least in its initial stages, does not look like new life at all. By blurring the line between late winter and early spring, the poem suggests that rebirth isn't a clean break with the death and decay before it. Instead, it arises gradually and organically *from* death and decay.

Also worth noting is the word "approaches," the first main verb in the poem. This active word highlights the poem's point that though things may seem dead and static, some form of activity is already in motion. Spring, although "sluggish" and unsuspected, is quietly on its way.

LINES 16-19

They enter the ...
... cold, familiar wind—

After the interjection of lines 14-15, in which the poem declares the slow approach of spring in general, the speaker turns back to the dried plants, seeking signs of life.

Personified as "naked" and "uncertain," these plants seem fragile and vulnerable as babies: they're born helpless into the

harsh world of winter and need to be slowly nurtured until they grow strong. It's only very, very gradually that they come back to life. The poem suggests that, in the bleakest conditions, change for the better is inevitable—but not necessarily easy. These plants, like hope, need to develop and gain strength over time.

The poem strings its descriptions of the baby plants together with asyndeton: "naked, / cold, uncertain." These shivery little words, linked without so much as an "and" to support them, highlight the frailty of the reviving plants as they come into the world. Spring starts out small and, in many ways, looks just like the "cold" winter season before it. The repetition of the word "cold," in particular, serves to link the "cold" plants to the "cold," wintry landscape they are born into.

But this "cold" is "familiar," too—a word that reminds readers that these plants are *coming back* to life, not starting from scratch. The language here suggests that birth and death aren't a one-way street, but a cycle—a thought that is in itself hopeful. Nothing that dies, these lines suggest, is gone forever.

LINES 20-23

Now the grass, ...
... outline of leaf

Crucially, the new plants come into the world not all at once, but "[o]ne by one." The poem implies that, if renewal can indeed take place even in this bleak landscape, it is only slowly and gradually. But these lines also trace the spring's gathering momentum and confidence.

Take a look at the enjambment in lines 20-21:

> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

This unexpected line break creates a subtle moment of suspense, distinguishing the different stages of this natural, organic process and illustrating the step-by-step way plants return to life.

Here, the speaker considers not just generic plants, but specific ones, suggesting the way that new life slowly becomes more and more clearly "defined." Now there's more to see than just indistinguishable green shoots: the plants, identifiable as "grass" and "wildcarrot leaf," are becoming themselves, gaining a foothold. The process of renewal is finally really underway. And the "clarity" of the "outline[s]" here—accompanied by the precise imagery of the "stiff curl" of new leaves—suggests the excitement and relief of seeing that renewal clearly at last.

At last, the speaker says, spring "quickens," which can mean either "stirs with life" or "becomes quicker." The word conveys a fitting sense of burgeoning activity. After their frail and vulnerable birth, the plants are coming into their own.

LINES 24-27

But now the ...
... begin to awaken

Reiterating the speaker's earlier ideas about slow, gradual, almost imperceptible growth, the poem's last four lines metaphorically suggest that the truly important steps toward hope and rebirth are not always obvious, occurring quietly and out of sight.

Even as the little plants begin to develop "clarity," the spring is still making its "entrance" with "stark dignity": still making its gradual way into a bleak landscape. Spring's "entrance," the speaker reminds readers, looks just as bleak and bare as winter. The poem has suggested this before. But here, the speaker crucially adds that, even when spring looks "stark," the "profound change" has already taken place. Processes of renewal and hope, the poem suggests, may be at work even where we least suspect them.

The poem tries to illustrate what it means by this "change" by then personifying the emerging plants. Deep down, in their roots, the plants have begun to "grip down" and "awaken." In other words, they're hanging in there, actively grasping the earth as they begin to grow. Regaining hope in dark times, this poem's symbolism suggests, demands not just patience, but real tenacity, and faith that growth can still be happening out of sight.

Significantly, the poem ends with no closing punctuation. This open-ended conclusion suggests that the process of growth has only just begun and is ongoing. The renewal of spring may not be completely achieved—but it's on the way.

SYMBOLS

WINTER AND SPRING

Winter and spring, in this poem, symbolize death and life, despair and hope.

Winter, with its dead plants and frozen landscape, is an ancient symbol of death and hopelessness. This poem uses late-winter "cold" weather and withered plants (all on the road to the grim "contagious hospital") to symbolize hopeless situations more generally.

But the return of spring represents rebirth, hope and renewal. Spring, in this poem, comes on slowly; it is first "[l]ifeless in appearance" and "sluggish," and its plants sprout "[o]ne by one." The poem suggests that renewal also starts small in the midst of bleak conditions, before gradually gaining strength and asserting itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem's alliteration helps to immerse the reader in the bleak early spring landscape the speaker describes.

For example, take a look at the delicate alliteration in lines 5-6:

> waste of broad, muddy fields
> brown with dried weeds [...]

Ever so subtly, the resonant /br/ sound here emphasizes descriptive adjectives, highlighting the appearance of the landscape as a wasteland, very different from what one might expect spring to look like. The /r/ sounds in "road" and "reddish" in line 9, similarly, draw attention to the crumbly, muddy terrain, and help to highlight the fact that the "road" is merely "reddish" rather than fully "red." This reinforces the poem's suggestion that the spring is not yet vivid with colors, not yet fully defined.

Alliteration works like this throughout, calling readers' attention to the imagery of spring fighting to emerge from the winter landscape. Note how the crisp /t/ sounds of "tall trees" in line 8, seem to call forth the brittle, delicate branches of early spring (the sharp sounds of "scattering" adds to the effect).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Beyond"
- **Line 5:** "broad"
- **Line 6:** "brown"
- **Line 8:** "tall trees"
- **Line 9:** "road," "reddish"
- **Line 10:** "twiggy"
- **Line 11:** "stuff," "small," "trees"
- **Line 12:** "leaves"
- **Line 13:** "leafless"
- **Line 14:** "Lifeless," "sluggish"
- **Line 15:** "spring"
- **Line 16:** "new," "naked"
- **Line 21:** "curl," "wildcarrot"
- **Line 23:** "quickens," "clarity"
- **Line 24:** "stark"
- **Line 25:** "Still"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance to create a complex, elegant soundscape, giving the poem both music and meaning.

In the first half of the poem, for instance, assonance helps to create a picture of a consistently bleak landscape. Listen to the repeated vowel sounds here:

> northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
> waste of broad, muddy fields
> brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

The interweaving /ee/ and /aw/ sounds here highlight all of these elements of the landscape individually, but also tie them together into a single image of waste and decay.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "northeast," "Beyond"
- **Line 5:** "broad," "fields"
- **Line 6:** "weeds," "fallen"
- **Line 7:** "patches," "standing"
- **Line 8:** "scattering"
- **Line 9:** "All along"
- **Line 11:** "trees"
- **Line 12:** "leaves"
- **Line 13:** "leafless"
- **Line 27:** "grip," "begin"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, helps to weave images together, to draw attention to big thematic ideas, and to give the poem its music.

Consonance often subtly links one image to another. For instance, listen to the consonant sounds here:

> By the road to the contagious hospital
> under the surge of the blue

The repeated /j/ sound here subtly relates the idea of human death and decay at the "contagious hospital" to the "surg[ing]" energy of the natural world, helping to support the poem's idea that both human and natural decay, with time, can be overcome.

And take a look at the evocative consonance in lines 9-11:

> All along the road the reddish
> purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
> stuff of bushes and small trees

Here, the /st/, /sh/, and /d/ sounds tie together the various images of vegetation along the road, and suggest the bristling or rustling sounds of the dry, brittle plants.

Finally, listen to the crisp sounds in line 23:

> It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

The sharp /k/ sound that links "quickens" and "clarity" is

softened by the delicate /l/ of "clarity," "outline," and "leaf"—an effect that helps readers to feel both the clear edges and the gentle beauty of the coming spring.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "contagious"
- **Line 2:** "surge"
- **Line 3:** "driven"
- **Line 4:** "Beyond"
- **Line 5:** "waste," "broad," "muddy," "fields"
- **Line 6:** "brown," "dried," "weeds," "standing"
- **Line 7:** "standing," "water"
- **Line 8:** "scattering," "tall," "trees"
- **Line 9:** "road," "reddish"
- **Line 10:** "purplish," "forked," "upstanding"
- **Line 11:** "stuff," "bushes"
- **Line 12:** "dead," "leaves"
- **Line 13:** "leafless"
- **Line 14:** "Lifeless," "appearance," "sluggish"
- **Line 15:** "spring," "approaches"
- **Line 16:** "enter," "naked"
- **Line 17:** "cold," "uncertain"
- **Line 18:** "All"
- **Line 19:** "cold," "familiar"
- **Line 21:** "stiff," "curl," "wildcarrot," "leaf"
- **Line 23:** "quickens," "clarity," "outline"
- **Line 24:** "stark"
- **Line 25:** "entrance," "Still"
- **Line 26:** "rooted"
- **Line 27:** "grip," "down," "begin," "awaken"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment controls the poem's pace and creates subtle moments of anticipation that evoke the gradual coming of spring.

For instance, listen to the enjambment in lines 3-5:

> [...] driven from the
> northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
> waste of broad [...]

These line breaks create subtle moments of suspense as the bleak landscape is gradually revealed—an effect that strengthens readers' surprise at this unconventional portrait of a grim, muddy spring.

As spring emerges from this unpromising landscape, enjambed lines begin to do something a little different. For example, the enjambment at the end of line 20 helps reflect the step-by-step unfolding of new plants:

> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

Both visually and rhythmically, the break after "tomorrow" breaks up the blossoming of different plants into distinct stages. This helps to give readers feel the spring's slow-paced regrowth: first the "grass" comes in, *then* the "wildcarrot" leaves.

The final stanza, meanwhile, is enjambed all the way through:

> [...] stark dignity of
> entrance—Still, the profound change
> has come upon them: rooted, they
> grip down [...]

These enjambments help to highlight important dramatic words like "entrance" and "change," but also just remind readers that the cycle of the seasons is a constant and continuous process. Even in the grimmest parts of winter, spring is on the way.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "blue / mottled"
- **Lines 3-4:** "the / northeast"
- **Lines 4-5:** "the / waste"
- **Lines 9-10:** "reddish / purplish,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "twiggy / stuff"
- **Lines 11-12:** "trees / with"
- **Lines 14-15:** "sluggish / dazed"
- **Lines 17-18:** "all / save"
- **Lines 18-19:** "them / the"
- **Lines 20-21:** "tomorrow / the"
- **Lines 24-25:** "of / entrance"
- **Lines 25-26:** "change / has"
- **Lines 26-27:** "they / grip"

REPETITION

Repetition helps to evoke to the poem's landscape, and to draw attention to the symbolism of winter and spring.

For example, the word "brown" appears twice, describing "dried weeds" and fallen "leaves." Returning to this color of dryness and decay, the poem drives home the point that this landscape is very different from conventionally vibrant and flowery images of spring. The repetition of "trees" in lines 8 and 11, meanwhile, creates a sense that this landscape is actually pretty full of life: there's a whole forest here, and it only looks dead for the time being.

The subtler polyptoton of "standing" in lines 6 and 7 with "upstanding" in line 10 draws attention to the landscape's persistent bleakness. These repeated words describe quite different things: still, stagnant pools of water, brittle "dried weeds," and rigid twigs. The repetition here thus draws attention to the seemingly frozen and unmoving winter world. Everything here is motionless and stiff in similar ways.

And all across the poem, the polyptoton of variations on the word "leaf," from "leaves" to "leafless," reminds readers that the cycle of the seasons has happened millions of times before: the old "leaves" on the ground are the forbears of each new "leaf" unfurling now.

In the second half, the poem uses repetitions to illustrate its point about the real nature of spring. The word "cold," which describes both the wind and spring's newborn plants, draws a connection between new life and the cold wind that still surrounds it—and suggests an odd continuity between spring and the harsh winter it comes to replace.

Other repetitions, meanwhile, suggest spring's inevitability:

> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save that they enter.

The diacope here emphasizes the idea of the plants' "entrance": the idea that spring doesn't simply oust winter, but gradually *comes into* it. Further, like newborns, the personified new plants are certain *only* of the fact that they are now entering, thrust into the word without being sure what exactly they're being thrust into.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "cold," "wind"
- **Line 6:** "brown," "standing"
- **Line 7:** "standing"
- **Line 8:** "trees"
- **Line 10:** "upstanding"
- **Line 11:** "trees"
- **Line 12:** "brown," "leaves"
- **Line 13:** "leafless"
- **Line 16:** "enter"
- **Line 17:** "cold"
- **Line 18:** "enter"
- **Line 19:** "cold," "wind"
- **Line 21:** "leaf"
- **Line 23:** "leaf"
- **Line 25:** "entrance"

CAESURA

Caesura helps to pace the poem, emphasizing its images of slow spring renewal.

In line 4, for instance, several marked pauses slow the poem down:

> northeast—|| a cold wind. || Beyond, || the

The pauses that frame the words "a cold wind" evoke the barren, windswept scene around the "contagious hospital." All the caesurae in this line help to create the sense that everything seems to be moving slowly in this bleak landscape.

But later on, caesurae emphasize the process of renewal:

> It quickens: || clarity, || outline of leaf

The caesurae after "quickens" and "clarity" create light pauses in the rhythm of the line, as if to suggest the gradual, halting growth of the leaves. At the same time, the colon here helps give weight and attention to the moment when plants gain "clarity" and new life becomes more and more defined.

And two powerful caesurae near the very end of the poem help to dramatize the subtle "change" of winter into spring:

> But now the stark dignity of
> entrance—|| Still, the profound change
> has come upon them: || rooted, they
> grip down and begin to awaken

In line 25, the poem uses a dash to mark a sudden change in the speaker's thoughts, driving home the point that even if nature still looks "stark" (and seems no different than winter), a "profound change" has already occurred for the plants. And in line 26, a colon feels like a drumroll, dramatically introducing the plants that have "rooted" and started to grow in earnest.

Through its caesurae, the poem thus highlights two of its big themes: the most important "changes" are often unseen, and the first stages of renewal may take place long before people notice them.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "northeast—a," "wind. Beyond, the"
- **Line 5:** "broad, muddy"
- **Line 6:** "weeds, standing"
- **Line 10:** "purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy"
- **Line 12:** "dead, brown"
- **Line 17:** "cold, uncertain"
- **Line 18:** "enter. All "
- **Line 20:** "grass, tomorrow"
- **Line 23:** "quickens: clarity, outline"
- **Line 25:** "entrance—Still, the"
- **Line 26:** "them: rooted, they"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps to evoke the first stirrings of life after winter.

Personification doesn't appear in the poem until halfway through, when little signs of spring begin to appear:

> Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
> dazed spring approaches—

This description gives the season some humanlike personality and agency, and makes it sound vulnerable: it's "sluggish" and "dazed" as a newborn baby. This personification suggests that the new life of spring is weak, small, and almost out of place in the cold world it is born into. But it's coming anyway.

Later, the poem personifies the reviving plants of spring:

> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save that they enter.

Here, the adjectives "naked, / cold, uncertain" again might put readers in mind of a newborn baby. The poem implies that spring starts out small and vulnerable and must slowly gain strength and vitality.

In the poem's very last lines, the budding young shoots are once again personified to illustrate the beauty and difficulty of rebirth: they "grip down and begin to awaken." "Grip[ping]" the earth, new life struggles to establish itself into the world, suggesting that renewal is gradual but not always easy. Every spring, the poem implies, is the result of a slow, difficult struggle to establish new life, one that always wins through in the end.

The poem's personification helps make the point that, in times of bleakness and despair, even small, subtle and gradual efforts can set in motion a glorious process of renewal.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed spring approaches—"
- **Lines 16-18:** "They enter the new world naked, / cold, uncertain of all / save that they enter."
- **Lines 25-27:** "Still, the profound change / has come upon them: rooted, they / grip down and begin to awaken"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps the speaker to evoke the different energies of the poem's late-winter, early-spring landscape.

One striking moment of asyndeton describes the "reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy" plants by the roadside. By omitting conjunctions, the poem creates a striking rhythm as each of the five adjectives here is highlighted in turn, evoking an image of dead vegetation chaotically clumped together.

Another key example appears in the description of the young shoots in lines 16-17:

> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save that they enter.

As in the previous example, the asyndeton here gives the line a punchy, emphatic rhythm. But since this phrase uses fewer adjectives, the rhythm only briefly "tenses up" before relaxing into the smooth, uninterrupted flow of the rest of the sentence. Leaving out the conjunction here thus gives the poem some forward momentum that fits right in with the idea of "entering." It's as if the sentence itself hesitates briefly before smoothly proceeding onward, just like the little plants springing up in spite of the cold and their "uncertain[ty]."

The asyndeton in this poem thus helps the reader to feel the tension, nervousness, and excitement of the coming spring.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "with dried weeds, standing and fallen"
- **Lines 10-11:** "purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy / stuff"
- **Lines 16-17:** "naked, / cold, uncertain of all"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Now the grass, tomorrow / the stiff curl"
- **Line 23:** "clarity, outline of leaf"

VOCABULARY

Surge (Lines 2-3) - A surge usually refers to a swelling or rushing movement, especially of waves. Here, it describes the clouds being driven by the wind like a sea wave.

Mottled (Lines 2-3) - Spotted or streaked.

Waste (Lines 4-5) - An expanse of barren land.

Upstanding (Lines 10-11) - Standing stiffly upright.

Twiggy (Lines 10-11) - Made of twigs, full of twigs.

Wildcarrot (Line 21) - A plant with tall white flowers, also commonly known as Queen Anne's lace or cow parsley.

Quickens (Line 23) - This word can mean either "comes to life" or "becomes quicker." In either case, it helps suggest that nature is reviving.

Stark (Lines 24-25) - This word can mean either "sharply defined" or "bare and bleak."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Spring and All" is a free verse poem, so it doesn't use any fixed form. Its 27 lines are divided into eight stanzas of between two and six lines each. These varied stanzas suggest the slow, gradual, and sometimes surprising coming of spring. For instance, take a look at the way the speaker uses two short stanzas in a row in lines 20-23:

> Now the grass, tomorrow
> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
> One by one objects are defined—

It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

This pair of two-line stanzas evokes the way the leaves begin to peep out, bit by tiny bit.

The poem also uses unusual sentence structure to paint a picture of life emerging slowly from a dead landscape. In the first half of the poem, where the speaker describes the muddy, dreary scene, many sentences don't have a main verb, reflecting just how frozen and still the world appears: no action here! But in the second half, when the speaker watches little signs of life appearing, verbs like "approaches" and "quickens" start to pop up like flowers.

METER

"Spring and All" has no meter: it's written in free verse. That means the speaker can vary lines organically, mirroring the growth the poem describes—or the deceptive stillness that conceals that growth.

For instance, take a look at lines 9-12:

> All along the road the reddish
> purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
> stuff of bushes and small trees
> with dead, brown leaves under them

All these lines are *around* the same length, creating a feeling of monotony that evokes the dreary, lifeless landscape. That consistency makes it all the more striking when this more-or-less regular rhythm is interrupted by a very short two-word line right afterward:

> leafless vines—

By setting up a regular rhythm and then subverting it, the poem heightens the surprise of the speaker's announcement that, in fact, spring is already moving through this seemingly-frozen landscape.

RHYME SCHEME

"Spring and All" is written in free verse, and doesn't use a rhyme scheme.

But it does use subtle patterns of repeated words at the ends of lines. For instance, lines 8 and 11 both end with "trees":

> stuff of bushes and small trees
> [...]
> the scattering of tall trees

Lines 21 and 23 both end with the word "leaf":

> the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
> [...]
> It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

These understated echoes reflect the organic, seamless growth of nature—and hint that more and more trees and leaves are springing to life.

The poem also uses assonance where other poems might use rhyme, producing a subtler sense of harmony and linkage. For instance, listen to the repeated sounds at the end of the poem:

> [...] Still, the profound change
> [...] rooted, they
> [...] begin to awaken

That repeated long /ay/ sound evokes the way that spring gathers strength, quietly and out of sight.

SPEAKER

The poem has no distinct speaker. There is no "I" named in the poem, nor any personal details. It's unclear whether the speaker is a person standing by the roadside, or simply an omniscient viewer. The timescale of the poem, which describes plants very slowly becoming more "defined" as spring comes on, makes it unlikely that the speaker is a person standing there for the entire duration of the poem.

However, there are hints that speaker may reflect Williams's own perspective. Since Williams was a doctor, it seems believable that he might have walked to a "hospital" where he worked, observing the late winter landscape subtly changing from day to day.

Although the poem avoids subjective or emotionally loaded language, its focus reveals something about the speaker's values. By celebrating spring, the speaker quietly makes a case for hope even in the most difficult times.

SETTING

The poem is set by a roadside near a "contagious hospital." This physical setting is significant, representing the death and decay from which new life will eventually bloom: hospitals, after all, are not only where patients suffer disease, but where they recover.

While the poem takes place in spring, the natural landscape is still "brown" and bleak: full of weeds, dead leaves, mud, and bare branches. There are no blossoming flowers, luxuriant plants, or singing birds. Although the sky is "blue," the weather is still "cold." This description sets up the poem's point that spring, in its early stages, is "[l]ifeless in appearance" and only very gradually gathers force.

With its description of "cold" wind and dead leaves, the

landscape seems closer to winter. And yet, the poem suggests, spring is already starting to emerge. The poem leaves off at just the moment where the plants start to "awaken," leaving readers with some hope that things will soon change.

The setting, in short, symbolizes the passage from death to rebirth, from despair to hope.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Carlos Williams's "Spring and All" originally appeared in a book also titled *Spring and All* (1923), a collection of poetry and prose. The book's prose sections 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."

Like the other poems in the volume, "Spring and All" originally appeared without a title, marked only with the Roman numeral I. Poem I and Poem XXII (better known as "The Red Wheelbarrow") are both good examples of Williams's distinctive style, with its sharp, intense focus on concrete images.

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

Williams was particularly associated with Imagism, a movement in American and European poetry that emphasized clear, precise language and sharp, powerful images. The movement was championed early on by the American modernist poet Ezra Pound, who helped Williams get published and had a huge influence on his early poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Spring and All" was published in 1923, in the wake of the First World War (1914-1918). Those who lived through the war had witnessed death, disease, and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Perhaps above all, the war had proved that modern technology could cause untold havoc and devastation.

The Spanish flu also struck in 1918, killing millions of people, including an estimated 500,000 to 850,000 Americans. The memory would have been fresh in the minds of Williams and his contemporaries. Perhaps the flu pandemic gives this poem its famous first line, with its suggestive image of the "contagious hospital."

A major poem that captured the ethos of this dark time was T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," published in December of 1922. Instantly hailed as a modernist masterpiece, the poem became famous for its challenging, elusive style and its bleak, despairing outlook on the state of civilization and the world.

"Spring and All," published just months after "The Waste Land," was in many ways a direct response Eliot's poem. While Eliot pessimistically described the world's harsh realities, Williams wanted to continue believing in the possibility of recovery and renewal. And while Williams's poem also features a wasteland, spring nevertheless "approaches." In this light, "Spring and All" gave its shaken audience a reminder not to lose hope. It offered Williams's readers an important consolation: even when times look bleak, renewal may be on the horizon.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky reading "Spring and All" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfOp5MGeDAM)
- A Short Biography — Learn about Williams's life and work through the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-carlos-williams)
- A Reflection on the Poem — Read the President of the Library of America's response to the poem. (https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1627-a-season-of-vulnerability-and-hope-on-william-carlos-williamss-spring-and-all)
- Spring and All — Check out the rest of the book in which the poem first appeared. (https://archive.org/details/spring_and_all/page/n11/mode/2up)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS POEMS

- Landscape with the Fall of Icarus
- The Red Wheelbarrow
- This Is Just To Say

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