

The Absurd and the Ordinary: Camusian Existentialism in Williams' Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 09 Dec 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Jan 2026; Accepted: 17 Jan 2026; Available online: 23 Jan 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Camusian Existentialism, Absurd, William Carlis Williams, Poetry, Icarus, Indifference, Fall, Death, Universe.</p>	<p><i>This paper examines William Carlos Williams' poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" through the philosophical lens of Albert Camus' concept of the absurd. While no direct intellectual connection between Williams and Camus has been documented, both writers confront a similar modern condition: the tension between human desire for meaning and the indifference of the world. Drawing on Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus and Williams' poetics of the ordinary, this study argues that the poem embodies a distinctly Camusian sensibility. Through close reading, the analysis reveals how the poem's understated tone, sparse imagery, and focus on everyday labor reframe the mythic fall of Icarus as a quiet, unnoticed event. This shift from heroic tragedy to mundane continuity highlights the poem's existential insight – that human aspirations often remain unseen within the vast neutrality of the world. By situating the poem within the broader context of ekphrastic interpretation and modernist aesthetics, the study demonstrates how Williams transforms Brueghel's painting into a meditation on the absurd and the ordinary. Ultimately, the paper shows that Williams' poetic attention to the everyday converges with Camus' philosophical call for lucidity, grounding the myth in the rhythms of real life.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

"The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (Albert Camus)

The purpose of this paper is to figure out the Camusian existentialism hidden behind the ekphrasis "Landscape with the fall of Icarus" written by William Carlos Williams with the companionship of the absurd and ordinary in human life. To investigate the work deeply the ekphrasis will be analyzed line by line digging into metaphors, poetic mood, themes, and the historical background of the painting which was the reason for the birth of the poem. Current study services to understand that

William Carlos is not only a master of the miraculous transformation but also his philosophical ideas in "Landscape with the fall of Icarus".

II. ANALYTIC BODY

"Landscape with the fall of Icarus" is considered one of the most prestigious pieces of art created by Pieter Bruegel the Elder during the Renaissance period in sixteenth century. At first glance, the painting looks like a peaceful rural landscape that gives the observer a sense of inner peace. Because there is a farmer ploughing a field, a shepherd tending sheep, or a busy harbor doing their ordinary daily tasks.

Even the sunset or late-afternoon lights the scene with warm feelings. But when you look carefully, in the bottom of the right corner Icarus's legs can be seen disappearing into the sea which is tiny, almost invisible splash. And here, there is a deep-rooted sense of wisdom where the absurd and ordinary crossed with each other, only this tiny part of the painting opens the door to the original world of existentialism of Camus. While discussing the existentialism of Camus and the poem itself, it is impossible to ignore the historical background of the story described in the painting. Pieter Bruegel gave a new birth to the Greek myth of Icarus in his work. In the myth, Icarus and his father Daedalus escape Crete who wanted to kill them as soon as achieving what he wanted. Using wings made of wax and feathers they flew away from Crete. Icarus flew too close to the sun neglecting his father's warns and fell into the sea after the wax melted because of the sun's high temperature. Bruegel does not dramatize the fall in the painting, suggesting that life goes on and captures more attention to human labor and nature continues unconcerned with individual tragedy. Indeed, the exact point of the painting is the greatest concern of Williams in his poem. This quiet indifference is described in the poem which is the same what Camus's philosophy of the absurd that the human desire for significance versus the world's indifference. William Carlos composed "Landscape with the fall of Icarus" around 1958 when his career was near to ending. Although the connection between Camusian existentialism and Williams ekphrasis has never been studied before the meaning and interpretations show the close relationship in the message that the poem carries in lines.

III. THE SCENE OF THE ORDINARY

Ordinary is the first breath of the "Landscape with the fall of Icarus" that initial lines share a reader a sense of pastoral normality. William Carlos Williams uses ordinary words to describe the situation derived from the painting, especially his redefining the myth of Icarus gives the poem a simple, humble and even strongly believable essence.

According to Bruegel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field.

The fall is tragically unexpected into calm continuity of agricultural life. But the use of words in the poem steals away a mind from the fall to ordinary life immediately, washing the sense of tragedy away without leaving any tragic feelings. The seasonal image of *spring* is traditionally considered as a renewal and fertility, new birth and beginnings in which a tragic death occurs. Through this justification, Williams reorients the reader's attention from the spectacular to the mundane which makes the poem rare, enjoyable, and even more sophisticated. Sophistication itself is a mirror to the philosophical thoughts of William reflecting a spiritual connection to Albert Camus's notion of the absurd. Camus argues that "the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (The Myth of Sisyphus, 1942). Because the *farmer* is so busy with *ploughing* represents the individual who is so immersed in daily tasks neglecting anything happening around him in a world indifferent to human aspiration or tragedy. The farmer is not spiritually alive; he just simply exists that Camus defines this existence "absurd man". William transforms the myth of Icarus into a landscape of everyday persistence, individually existence but not alive where the flaw of life continues insignificantly but inevitably. The opening stage lines of the poem are foundations for meditation on the coexistence of human striving and the quite continuity of the world with the help of calm tone and changing focus on ordinary motion from the *fall* to the absurd.

IV. THE ABSURD AND INDIFFERENCE

As the scenario moves from the farmer, field, and absurd through the natural surroundings, Williams deepens his meditation on the world's indifference to individual suffering, personal pain.

the whole pageantry
of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

The first line of this part stresses the word of *pageantry* which is a very important key to open the gate of the poem's meaning. This word defines a spectacle where dramatic situations occur but here, it describes a very quiet unfolding of seasonal life including sunlight, warmth, and natural vitality. The unique choice of the word *pageantry* symbolizes a delicate performance of the world which has its own rhythm, script, scenario and no matter who comes and goes upon its stages. Williams used enjambment and line breaks strategically such as the isolation of *near* and *concerned* allows readers to gaze. Readers' concern is self-sufficiency of nature (*sea, edge*) forgetting or ignoring the fate of Icarus. The natural self-concern that Williams describes is logically connected to the description of the absurd universe mentioned by Albert Camus. Camus ironically believes that the world is neither hostile nor benevolent but simply silent and self-contained. In the Myth of Sisyphus (1942) Camus writes of the unreasonable silence of the world as the backdrop against which human desires for meaning collide. Williams describes this situation through the absence of reaction (*the farmer keeps ploughing, the year keeps unfolding, the sea keeps moving*). These chains of words are the justification of the philosophical thoughts written by Camus in which the fall of Icarus cannot ruin the peace of the sleeping world, barely disturb the flow of life. Here, the writer shows the meaningless conflict between human significance and the world's indifference as a key tension of absurdism. Williams' calm, descriptive tone is a strong philosophical statement whispering that nature endures, even as individuals fall.

V. THE FALL AND UNNOTICED TRAGEDY

The next lines of the poem are quite yet devastating climax:

there was

The myth of Icarus is usually a grandeur, hubris, and divine consequence of traditional story. However, Williams uses ordinary words and writes it like a daily report in other words he intentionally employs understatement as a literary device, dimming what is typical of celebration a tragic fall into something mundane. Especially, the word splash is used to describe the sound of the fall which is a simple sound of water not a fall of a life being, human, destiny. This absurdism slows the reader's pace, forcing them to wake the sense of mercy or anger to the absence of reaction to the occurring fall instead of the event itself. The choice of this kind of style resonates deeply with the absurdism of Camus. Clearly, Camus observes that the universe offers no response to human suffering and tragedy is not inherently meaningful, yet it becomes meaningful only through human interpretation. Williams' God-gifted talent gives him a chance to portray precisely this cosmic indifference. While reading the last part of the poem's reader can feel the indifference: continuously shining sun, moving sea, and even silent nature. The fall once a mythic event is now an unnoticed accident in the tiny part of the world, busy activeness. This indifference is not a cruel happening. It is just the essence of the absurdity that a human desire for reaction and transcendence meets a world which simply does not care. Camus and Williams create a crush between freedom and absurdness that a human can create their own destiny by choosing directions or making decisions. Flying toward the sun is a mirror to the devastating results of wrong decisions. William transforms a legendary myth into a philosophical landscape that a quiet space where human ambition collides with the world's indifference.

VI. DISCUSSION

The philosophical tension in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" is relatively connected to the idea of absurd that William Carlos Williams aligns closely to Albert Camus. When Camus says that humans must live regardless of unreasonable silence of the world Williams redefines the same idea in his poem

with calm, detached tone. For example, Williams mentions the farmer, the sea, and the sun continue their daily rhythms regardless of unexpected fall. According to the terms of Camus the fall of Icarus is not a moral failure or divine punishment, it is a moment of absurd realization indeed. The splash is not capable to get the attention of surroundings because the universe is totally indifferent to human drama. This cosmic neutrality destabilizes a traditional notion of heroism which has been passed down from generation to generation. While other classic epics describe the fall of the hero so dramatic that it shakes the heavens, stars drop into the earth, or sun burns in its own fire the fall of Icarus as William emphasizes barely disturbs the surface of the water. Absurd and ordinary surroundings with indifference, as Camus claims, justify that the universe offers no inherent meaning to human acts. Because Icarus finds meaning from flying and the universe remains silent, he falls, and the world is silent. Williams' poem does not describe human aspiration, instead, he displays its tragic beauty. The beauty of the tragic fall reflects an absurd condition, seeking meaning, world's indifference and within this situation, one must choose to live, act, and create that echoes Williams' philosophy in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus". Both Williams and Camus admit absurd and ordinary. However, Williams refuses despair. Instead, he observes with clarity and carefully restrains the quiet truth of the human condition.

VII. CONCLUSION

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams is, at first glance, a quite and simple with its plain diction, brief length, and even monotonous tone which seems boring or minimize the dramatic fall of Icarus. Yet, with close reading and philosophical eyes it is one of the most meaningful works in the literal world. William's philosophical gesture of pencil reframes a legendary moment not as cosmic event but happening in the ordinary landscape without chaos or witnesses. This is a justification for human natural existence in a silent, totally indifferent universe. Absurd conditions as Camus mentioned are described with the symbol of sun, sea, farmer, and unnoticed splash which is the mirror of indifference. There is no divine invention

or grand moral that William tries to show in his poem. There are only the fall and the continuing world which gives a sense of attractiveness and strength to the poem. A reader can assume the invisible truth in the poem which the world does not care about or respond to a human suffering or ambition but goes on to play its own performance in the stage of the universe. However, there is a conflict in Camus and William's conclusions. Camus believes that the silence of the world frees individuals from pressure of cosmic expectation. According to Camus freedom of universal needs create meaning of life instead of receiving or begging to achieve. Although Icarus falls, he achieves free will, his ambitions push him to go forward that living is to act within an indifferent universe and find significance not in cosmic validation, but in the act itself. In conclusion, Williams and Camus meet across discipline and share their acknowledgements of the human condition in different genres under the same philosophical thoughts.

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