Moore, Marianne

by Darcy Mason (with Miranda Hickman)

**Thumbnail (if needed)**Marianne Moore (1887-1972), born in Kirkwood, Missouri, USA, was a major American modernist poet and editor of *The Dial* 1925-1929. Among other modernist poets with whom Moore sustained significant connections were T.S. Eliot, H.D., Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. Moore attended Bryn Mawr College for women in Pennsylvania 1905-1909; thereafter she moved to New York with her mother, Mary Warner Moore, where they would reside together until Mary Warner Moore died in 1947 and where Moore would remain until the end of her life. Moore’s major publications include *Selected Poems* (1935), with an introduction by T.S. Eliot; *Collected Poems* (1951)*,* for which Moore received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; and *Complete Poems*  (1967), which was re-edited and reissued in 1981. Her extensive body of criticism is available in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore.* Moore’s archive, including her library and personal effects, is housed at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia; additional papers are located at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin and the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Linda Leavell’s biography of Moore, *Holding on Upside Down*, appeared in 2013.

American modernist poet Marianne Moore was born in Kirkwood, Missouri on 15 November 1887 to John Milton Moore and Mary Warner Moore. Suffering from mental illness for which he would later be institutionalised, John Milton Moore left the family in 1887, after which point Mary Warner Moore raised Marianne and her older brother John Warner largely on her own. The Moores were intensely close, addressing one another in their frequent letters by affectionate animal nicknames, some of them drawn from Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows.* From 1905 to 1909, Moore attended Bryn Mawr College for women in Pennsylvania, majoring in history, politics and economics (Hicok59) under feminist president M. Carey Thomas. After college, Moore again lived with her mother, and the two relocated to New York in 1918, first to Greenwich Village and then to Brooklyn, where both would reside until the end of their lives. Moore’s mother remained integrally involved in both Moore’s life and work; after Mary Warner Moore died in 1947, to assuage her grief, Moore devoted herself to an English translation of the *Fables* of Jean de la Fontaine, published in 1954.

Beginning in 1915, Moore’s early poetry was published in little magazines associated with innovative verse such as *Poetry*, *The Egoist,* and *Others.* In 1921, fellow modernist poet H.D. and H.D.’s partner Bryher (Winifred Ellerman) published Moore’s first collection of poetry, without Moore’s permission, under the title *Poems.* Moore expressed misgivings about both the deception and the project (Leavell 190); yet this collection helped to develop Moore’s reputation, as didher next volume, *Observations* (1924). In 1925, Moore became editor of *The Dial* until its end in 1929 (see Marek). In 1935, T.S. Eliot composed an influential, laudatory introduction to Moore’s *Selected Poems*, suggesting that Moore’s poems were ‘part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time’ (12). Moore by this point took an active interest in mentoring young poets, most notably Elizabeth Bishop. In 1967 Moore published *The Complete Poems*, which was re-edited and reissued in 1981. Moore’s prose works, chiefly literary criticism, are collected in the *Complete Prose of Marianne Moore.*

Over the course of her career, Moore received many prestigious awards: in 1952, for instance, Moore was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *Collected Poems* (1951) as well as the Bollingen Prize from the Library of Congress in 1953. By the 1960s, Moore was widely known for her public readings, black cape, tricorne hat reminiscent of American Revolutionary era costume, and her love of sports, especially baseball. When Moore died at eighty-four,the *New York Times* noted thather public memorial service was attended by a diverse group of about two hundred mourners, reflecting the many communities with which Moore had associated. Moore sold her archive to the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia; additional papers are housed the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin and Yale’s Beinecke Library.

Signatures of Moore’s poetry include syllabic verse (her command of which is rare among poets working in English), detailed observation, a wealth of quotations, and meticulous attention to the natural world—as well as for the many ways its techniques are ‘disruptive’ of the ‘pleasant progress’ of ordinary reading, as Moore once observed of the effects of her quotations in particular (*Complete Poems* 262). For instance, the frequently anthologized ‘The Fish’ disorients readers through the surprising patterns generated by syllabic meter and by the poem’s attention not to the ‘fish’ of the title but rather a surprisingly diverse array of elements in the ecosystem portrayed. Although Moore’s poetry has often been credited with a scientific precision—Moore’s scientific reading included the work of Charles Darwin, naturalist Alphonse De Candolle, and *Scientific American—*Victoria Bazin suggests that Moore was ‘both immersed in and profoundly skeptical of Western scientific disciplines’ (154). Moore’s interest in Darwin has often been used as a critical frame for her frequent attention in her poetry to flora and fauna. Robin Schulze even suggests that Moore’s editorial practices might be read through a Darwinian lens, suggesting that Moore allowed poems to ‘evolve’ best to fit the environment of the moment (‘Textual Darwinism’). Moore’s characteristic emphasis on animal subjects in her poems (e.g. in ‘The Jerboa,’ ‘The Buffalo,’ ‘The Pangolin,’ ‘The Frigate Pelican’) has also been read as suggesting religious interest in the virtues animals can exemplify for humanity; Srikanth Reddy, for instance, argues that ‘The Pangolin’ models a Christian understanding of grace.

Until the 1990s, feminist readings of Moore’s poetry were few; feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s turned elsewhere to poetry whose feminist work was more readily evident than it is in Moore’s verse, which has often been associated with the modernist, Eliotic ideal of impersonality and which Cristanne Miller characterizes as ‘non(auto)biographical’ and ‘anti-essentialist’ (32). As Miller notes, this lack of feminist criticism ‘may result as much from current trends in feminism and what it typically recognizes as feminist poetry as from the characteristics of Moore’s own verse’ (24). Miller is among many recent commentators crediting Moore’s poetry with feminist work.

In later collections Moore characteristically revised her early poetry extensively, often omitting early work. Like many of her major poems, her *ars poetica* ‘Poetry’ exists in multiple versions; Moore’s most drastic revision of this poem appears in *Complete Poems*, whose epigraph, borrowed from a quip of Moore’s, fittingly states that ‘omissions are not accidents’: originally thirty lines, the poem appears here in a three-line form reminiscent of haiku. Such editorial decisions have drawn the attention of textual scholarship and occasioned critical debate (Schulze, ‘How Not to Edit’), and several recent volumes of Moore’s work have sought to restore the availability of her early poetry, often eliminated from subsequent collections.

**List of Works (in chronological order)**

Moore, M. (1921) *Poems*, London: Egoist Press.

---. (1924) *Observations*, New York: Dial Press.

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---. (1997) *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, eds. B. Costello, C. Goodridge, C. Miller, New York: Knopf.

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---. (2012) *Adversity & Grace: Marianne Moore, 1936-1941*, ed. H.C. White, Victoria, BC: ELS Editions.

**Further Reading**

Bazin, V. (2010) *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity*, Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate.

Eliot, T.S. (1935) “Introduction,” *Selected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 5-12.

Hicok, B. (2008) *Degrees of Freedom: American Women Poets and the Women’s College, 1905-1955,* Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.

Leavell, L. (2013) *Holding on Upside Down: The Life and Work of Marianne Moore*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

Marek, J.E. (1995) *Women Editing Modernism: ‘Little’ Magazines & Literary History*, Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 138-166.

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Reddy, S. (2005) ‘“To Explain Grace Requires a Curious Hand’: Marianne Moore’s Interdisciplinary Digressions’, *American Literature* 77: 451–81.

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---. (1998) ‘Textual Darwinism: Marianne Moore, the Text of Evolution, and the Evolving Text’, *Text* 11: 270–305. Print.