

The Red Wheelbarrow Study Guide

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Summary

“The Red Wheelbarrow” is perhaps one of the shortest serious poems ever published by an American poet. The structure is rigidly formal. The poem consists of four miniature stanzas of four words each.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Three images are involved: the wheelbarrow, described simply as red, the qualifying adjectival phrase “glazed with rain/ water,” which relieves the excessive severity of the second stanza, and the contrasting white chickens of the final stanza. The first line is colloquial and open in its invitation; the second line, the preposition “upon,” prepares the reader for the specifics to follow. Each two-line stanza has two stressed syllables in the first line and one in the second, and yet there is lively variation in where the stresses fall.

In “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams discovers an aesthetic pattern and sensory pleasure in an ordinary sight. The poem—or the moment of perception it reports—evokes no cultural traditions or literary associations. The absence of these is strongly noticed, however, for if the poem is an immediate experience, it is also a demonstration and argument. “So much depends,” it says, on the object being there, but it also means that so much depends on the reader’s response to what is seen. If one’s response is dull, the world takes on this quality, and the converse is also true. Thus, although Williams believed that the American environment offered a new challenge and possibility to poetry, his deeper meaning was that anything, however familiar or even drab, would become significant and moving when met with a full response.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

What “depends upon” a red wheelbarrow, white chickens, and rain? The reader is aware of the usefulness—in the case of rain, the necessity—of these things in the external world. The things referred to in the poem are also particular instances of types and classes of things—the wheelbarrow being a machine, for example, on which life also depends. Furthermore, sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas depend on such

things. As the poet expresses it in his poem “A Sort of a Song,” “No ideas/ but in things.” The faculty of the mind that has ideas is the imagination. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is about the relationship between the imagination and reality.

In *Spring and All*, Williams explains that the imagination is the opposite of fantasy; it penetrates fantasies to reveal realities. It clears away personal and conventional associations and meanings that human beings have attached to things, and to the words that represent them, enabling human consciousness to perceive the things of reality as directly as possible. In *Spring and All*, Williams writes: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination.”

The poet creates such an experience for the reader in “The Red Wheelbarrow.” The imagination is itself a force of nature that creates things like poems and wheelbarrows, just as nature creates rain and white chickens. The reader experiences the poet’s imagination in the process of making the poem, making a thing out of words to stand in relation to the reader as would an actual experience of the scene represented in the poem. Williams does not employ the lyric “I” of the poet’s personality or use the conventions and devices traditionally associated with poetry. This allows the reader to focus on the words and images of the poem. Williams’s strategies also seek to dissolve the personal ego of the reader. Forgetting self, the reader achieves a moment of pure awareness.

It is the poet’s mind that the reader experiences, as it selects and arranges the words of the poem, revealing the ideas implicit in them. The words depend on the things and the processes they name for their existence and meaning. In this light, the nonimagistic words in the poem are particularly interesting. The images name things and their visual qualities, but what is the difference between “a” red wheelbarrow and “the” red wheelbarrow? What ideas are referred to in the prepositions “on,” “with,” and “beside”? What is the meaning of “depends”? The ideas expressed by these words have been discovered by the human imagination in its contemplation of things and the relationships among them. Language depends on things, and civilization depends on language.

Analysis: The Poem

“The Red Wheelbarrow” is a brief lyric written in free verse. It is composed of four stanzas, each consisting of two short lines. The entire poem contains only sixteen words, four words in each stanza. The lyric “I” does not appear, placing the reader in direct contact with the images of the poem. These are presented one by one in short lines, which slow the reading and focus the reader’s attention on each bit of information in a sequence that suspends completion of the scene until the very last word. The surprise implicit in this arrangement is particularly present in the poem as it was first published, without a title, as poem number “XXII” in *Spring and All*. In that book William Carlos Williams alternates passages of prose expressing his theories of poetry with groups of poems illustrating those theories.

The poet begins with an impersonal statement, composed of abstract words: “so much depends/ upon.” This stanza creates suspense by raising the question, What depends on what? This is partly answered in the second stanza: “a red wheel/ barrow.” In contrast with the words of the first stanza, each word here, except for the article “a,” evokes a sense of impression. By dividing the word “wheelbarrow” into its parts, “wheel” and “barrow,” and by breaking the line after “barrow,” the poet slows the reading, which helps to imprint the image on the reader’s mind. It also makes a wheelbarrow less familiar than usual, its wheel separated from its barrow, a tray with two handles at each end for carrying loads. Implicit here is the original idea for the invention of a wheelbarrow.

In the third stanza the poet begins to provide a context for the wheelbarrow in the natural world with the information that it is “glazed with rain/ water.” It might be thought that the word “water” is superfluous. By

separating the word “rain” from “water” with a line break, however, the poet continues the slow motion and suggests that the rain has just stopped. The word “glazed” implies light shining off the film of water still present on the red paint of the wheelbarrow. The sun has come out.

The fourth and final stanza completes the scene. The wheelbarrow is “beside the white/ chickens.” The color white contrasts with the color red, which intensifies both colors and suggests bright light. The sentient chickens contrast with the inert wheelbarrow. The chickens are moving, and the scene comes alive. Human beings do not appear in the poem, but they are implied, as it took people to domesticate animals and invent machines.

Analysis: Forms and Devices

Williams has excluded most of the forms and devices traditionally associated with poetry in the composition of this poem. He rejects the convention of beginning each line with a capital letter; he does not employ a traditional form; he avoids writing in an established meter; and he does not use rhyme. He does not use words for their connotations or associations or write in elevated language. He excludes similes, metaphors, and symbols. Even the subject of the poem is mundane, a wheelbarrow not being the sort of thing likely to inspire aesthetic contemplation or reveal great truth. The term “anti-poetry,” sometimes applied to Williams’s work, is valid only in reference to characteristics such as these.

Williams relies almost entirely on images to communicate the meanings of “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and the poem exemplifies the principles of Imagism, a literary movement originated in London by friends of Williams, the American expatriate poets Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and Ezra Pound. Imagist poetry presents things directly, using only words essential to the presentation, and is composed in free verse. Although Williams sometimes used the term “Imagism” and “free verse” in reference to his work, he was intent on creating an American poetry distinct from English poetry, and he distanced himself from the expatriates, substituting the term “Objectivism” for “Imagism” and developing his conception of the variable foot to distinguish his versification from free verse.

Although the images in “The Red Wheelbarrow” refer to objects in the external world, Objectivism also applies to the poem as an object itself, made out of words and comparable to a painting made out of paint. Williams knew and was influenced by such visual artists as Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Demuth. He believed that a poem can be a painting and a painting can be a poem. “The Red Wheelbarrow” creates a visual scene in the reader’s mind, and the first stanza, “so much depends/ upon,” functions like a frame for the picture. It says, “Look at this.” A painting is seen, however, all at once, while the poem occurs image by image, line after line, having a duration in time.

The poem is intricately structured in repeating patterns. For example, there are four words and three stressed syllables in each stanza. Stanzas are arranged in two lines each, the first containing three words and two stressed syllables, the second containing one word and one stressed syllable. The poem also exemplifies the variable foot. Each line is a poetic foot, and each foot is to be given the same duration in reading. This results in a pause following the second line of each stanza to make up for the extra stressed syllable in each of the first lines. Variations in rhythm also result from the number and placement of unstressed syllables. For example, the unstressed syllable in the third line of the poem, “a red wheel,” comes before the two stressed syllables, while in the fifth line, “glazed with rain,” it comes between the two stressed syllables.

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