



[The Red Wheelbarrow](#), by William Carlos Williams

In A Nutshell

William Carlos Williams put wheelbarrows on the map. Seriously, because of this poem, wheelbarrows can no longer be considered ordinary farm things – we know them to be way cooler. After reading this poem, it's hard to see a red wheelbarrow or hear the words "red wheelbarrow" without thinking of William Carlos Williams. It's a pretty big deal. This poem may look short, but it's saucy. And it has a lot to say, or, rather, it has a lot of questions to ask. "The Red Wheelbarrow" first appeared in Williams's collection of poetry and prose entitled *Spring and All* in 1923. The poem describes a red wheelbarrow in the rain. But it is about so much more! Williams wrote it in the amount of time it takes to read the poem (i.e., less than five minutes). Talk about being on a poetic roll.

Williams was a doctor by day (a pediatrician/general practitioner to be exact), and a poet by night. Unlike most of us, he could have quit his day job, but he decided against that. Most of his patients didn't really know that he was a poet. It is rumored that he got the idea for "The Red Wheelbarrow" while tending to a patient. As he was treating her, he looked out the window and saw...a red wheelbarrow in the rain with some chickens. Maybe it was the sharp contrast between the beauty of the natural world and the pain his patient was experiencing, but Dr. Williams was moved by something.

Like many of his contemporaries, Williams was heavily influenced by Imagism, Dadaism, and Cubism, as well as a lot of other –isms. Many artists, poets, and thinkers sought to make sense

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of the irrational nature of war, which they witnessed in both World War I and World War II. Eventually, he stopped following these –isms and focused on his own goals as a poet. He sought to capture the unique sound of American speech rhythms in his poetry. He felt like this sound was being neglected in favor of a British sound, or, in other words, he felt like his fellow poets were mimicking the Brits. Williams said, "The American idiom has much to offer us that the English language has never heard of" (source).

William Carlos Williams earned the Pulitzer in 1963, two months after dying of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 79. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is one of his most famous poems for its ability to make the ordinary extraordinary.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Do you hear a voice in this poem? What kind of voice is it?
- 2 Why doesn't Williams capitalize his letters?
- 3 Why doesn't Williams use punctuation in this poem?

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