

# Williams and the red wheel barrow: humility in scope and style akin to his early ...

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In “ The Red Wheel Barrow” by William Carlos Williams, the reader is quickly led to an understanding of the simple unity of the piece—in a style he learned from years of humble practice. Four lines similar in meter, and each together forming a common theme of a quaint farm picture—but nothing more—lead to ambiguity. There is a lot of room for imaginative interpretation in the poem, which may have found its greater appeal—but which was also a result of Williams’s early experiences with relative anonymity from his peers in the poesies, which led him to write on such basic subject matter as a wheel barrow and white chickens. Although some schools of thought might fall to the conclusion that it is unfortunate Williams did not find success earlier, it is enlightening to note that without those early years of poetic work on his own time and by his own rules, he might never have found the style which would change poetry. So, his late success cannot be regretted by critics, but must be admired for his unfaltering lifelong persistence in the writing of poetry—and how his occupation as a doctor humbled him, influencing his choice of content and style with words. Red” is a poem of the senses, so basic in its claims that it merely touches us upon a scene of the imagination, where we are left wondering who left the wheel barrow here? And why were the chickens so white? A red wheel barrow “ glazed with rain / water”(Line 5-6), becomes somewhat of a moving image, as we think of the water slipping over the barrow, but beyond that, we must decide what this story is about.

These are arbitrary sense inputs, that when collected as one form an impression too unique to become unclear to anyone. Most people have an idea of what a wheel barrow looks like—or rain—or white chickens for that

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matter. But there is no action in the piece, except by the effect the scene has on the reader's emotions. Potential nostalgia bubbling up in the person picturing this somewhat pastoral snapshot is one of the only true actions that can be ascribed to the words. In this way, it is a very small drama of sorts.

It plays on a very narrow spectrum of human emotion. Yet, its very lack of a driving plot, voice or narrative, is in fact one of the reasons why the poem is considered so groundbreaking. It reflexively dwells on its own mechanics, by posing the consideration of how much power harbors in every little word of the English language—in their ability to conjure up emotional imagery, in even the most static, arc-less plot.

Indeed, this experimental style to the poem may not have been undertaken by Williams if he had become a successful poet early on. He may not have dared to write so self-indulgently—yet nevertheless, he started out as Dr. Williams, and so William the poet could write whatever he wanted. Indeed, therefore, it may be seen that the subject of “Red” is as mundane, static and seemingly innocuous as Williams' early poetic career, and yet ironically—it was that very style which eventually resonated with readers, and drew him up out of the relative obscurity of the medicine field. Although, in a summary to Jen Bryant's *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*, Susan N. Howard notes: Knowing that he could not make a living selling his poems, he pursued a career in the medical field, but he never gave up on his dream of writing poetry and continued to write every day. It is regretful that Williams did not become famous for his poetry until later in life.

(1) Howard need not be 'regretful', however, for if it were not for his early anonymity and public persona of Dr.

Williams, he may never have found his style that he did, in being against the constructs of plot and action. If Williams were a younger success in the poetics, he might have opted for more populist or accepted fare—but instead, he quietly braved his own way, and made acclaim for himself in the process. So, although some critics and reviewers alike may be quick to dismiss Williams late success, for how it aches from his early lost potential—upon closer inspection it becomes obvious that Williams founded his sparsely worded snapshot of poesy in the very style of the life that he was leading. He was just another poet by night, so he could focus on the everyday images that most piqued his imagination—unafraid of popular criticism. In this way then, he was able to take poetry in a unique direction, without the trappings of putting on airs or expectations—but with just the challenge to find those few words that suggested enough to be memorable, yet not so much as to be didactic in the telling of the story. Williams leaves enough room for interpretation that the everyman and scholastic alike liked it, and without that humility of message that may be more absent in poets who become successful young. Indeed, critical reaction ranges from small to large, in the descriptive sense, whereby you find Julio Marzan in *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, deconstructing the poem and poet at length: The soul-dead Elena, who held in her hand the empty pitcher from which she had poured out the regenerative vitality of water, is compressed into the idea of something on which so much pende ('hangs'). The original '

dangling,' a (suspected) Nordic word that means 'hang from,' was thus translated into the parallel Latinate 'depends.

The 'Spring!' around them and the sustaining image 'she serves / clear water' in 'Brilliant Sad Sun' are condensed into 'rainwater,' and this image is also reinforced by the atmosphere suggested by white chickens walking out in the rain. A melting of the 'glass pitcher' into 'glazed with rain / water' conserves the shining quality of the original 'pitcher.' (1) So, this demonstrates that comprehensive critical analysis can spring from the sparsest of poems.

Also, other critics may have less to say about the poem, shrugging it off as no more than the sum of its parts, being just an honest account about a wheel barrow. Nevertheless, everyone gets something out of Williams's words. He has the ability to connect with all types, and this could very well stem from his humble beginnings. Plus, it may be common opinion that he was well-liked by all, when in The Poetry Foundation praise for his humble character is evidenced throughout his biography: Williams lived a remarkably conventional life. A doctor for more than forty years .

.. he relied on his patients ..

. and his own ebullient imagination to create a distinctively American verse. Often domestic in focus and 'remarkable for its empathy, sympathy, its muscular and emotional identification with its subjects,' Williams's poetry is also characteristically honest: 'There is no optimistic blindness in Williams,' wrote Randall Jarrell, 'though there is a fresh gaiety, a stubborn or invincible

joyousness. '(1)But although some critics take this period of his life as regrettable, due to his lacking an early poetic success, the bottom line is, because he was gainfully employed as a doctor, Williams wrote only what he liked, and so he eventually struck a chord with some readers, and yet it could never have happened sooner, as his poetic style grew out of his occupational circumstance. Indeed, if he had never known relative anonymity in his poetic career, he may never have written "Red". While Williams was writing for himself, however, what he liked turned out to be liked by all. Williams admits outright, at the beginning of "Red", that interpretation of the piece is likely to become unpredictable.

"So much depends upon / a red wheel barrow"(1-2) he says. It could be any type of wheelbarrow, and if the poem ended there, one's imagination could run even more wild—however, the poem ends: "Glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens"(5-8). So with as much as it does say, it still says very little—only hinting at a sliver of a place and a day.

The images do build upon each other, so that the wheel barrow becomes glazed, and then set in the vicinity of some chickens—but there is no plot behind the words. There are no characters, beside perhaps the barrow and the chickens. Williams is turning concepts of action and story arc on heads here, by relying solely on a few choice words in a humble little quatrain. As much as a painter or photographer might try to tell a story in a single picture, Williams is trying to tell a picture instead of a story. Indeed, on deeper inquiry into the poet's history, one sees how the life and the times of

the man himself might have influenced his writing in such a symbiotic way, that the life became inseparable from the words.

Of course, since he did not become famous until later on, his fondness for writing would have been tested—given the lack of acknowledgment from his peers. But in light of this fact, one might only admire him more for persisting despite the want of attention. Plus, if the inaction of “Red” in any way reflects the inaction of his early career as a poet, while he worked the days as a doctor—and slaved over the words at night—then there might be some value to looking at how his lack of fame enabled his subject matter to be more experimental. In this very way then, while “Red” served to change the face of poetic landscapes forever—for Williams, he would have had it no other way. He cared more for the words themselves, than for the fad or fancy of the literati paradigm of his age. It is certainly possible that he felt if he could not be famous for it, then he might as well enjoy it—and so he wrote the pictures that he wanted to tell, and in so doing was able to better connect with his readership. Williams is concerned with remaining open to interpretation in “Red”, while still spinning the wheels of thought in the reader, enough to keep them interested. He wants his words to be well-chosen, because that is the type of poem he likes—and it helps him to speak to all levels and ages.

This humble balance of sophistication and minor distinctions, however, could not have found its way into his poetry, if he had not first experienced it in real life—so his poetic style was fated by his career in medicine, and early artistic anonymity. Williams understands that all images evoke emotions in

readers, and just as his early poetic life lacked action, so too his poetry lacked it—and instead concentrated on the power of the vision. By saying “So much depends”, he is alluding to how powerful just a few words can be—and indeed, more-so the fewer that are used. Plus, even the words he does use are not so specific as to defy variance in interpretation.

Although he uses visuals and color to move emotion in the reader, for instance, and red may be basically associated with passion, while white with purity—still, not everyone experiences the same feelings from the same colors. Williams manages to write in a style that pleases a big gamut of literary palettes, and it is purely because he has learned a lot about human nature in his work as a doctor—as it humanized and humbled him, and influenced the unique direction of his poetry. So, overall, inasmuch as Williams’s slow poetic success parallels the static nature of “Red”, it may be seen that Williams had become very observant of random little scenes such as this one.

He was unconcerned with the grander landscapes, being more preoccupied with the sublime minutia of everyday experiences. He was not a victim of early fame, causing him to want to write on sensational subjects—but rather, he was paying homage to his true humble character and history—by writing more about his own human smallness and empathy. Indeed, in her article “House Calls with William Carlos Williams, M.

D. ”, in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Michelle B. Riba quotes Dr. Williams’ assistant: “ More important than the steel instruments, though, Dr.



Williams took the time to look at and understand people in their own neighbourhoods and homes”.

Williams lived a full life as doctor, let alone a poet. He was a late-bloomer on the poetry stage, but an early prodigy in humanism—which possibly humbled him to the everyday realities of living in artistic anonymity—and empathizing with the commoners. Milton A. Cohen also touches on this humility, in “Stumbling into Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, Partisan Review, and the Left in the 1930s”, in the *Journal of Modern Literature*.

He notes: “ Williams’s own poetry and fiction in the 1930s show a genuine empathy (without cant or cliché) for the working class—a quality that was more talked about than achieved in leftist circles. ” Again, we are reminded that for many years Williams was just another poet working after hours, which prompted him to forge his unique style—and therefore his craft was the result of his past, and he could not have been anybody else, if he had not first been Dr. Williams. If he had never first known relative anonymity in his poetic career, he may never have written such a humble poem as “ Red”.