

# The Red Wheelbarrow



## POEM TEXT

1 so much depends  
2 upon  
3 a red wheel  
4 barrow  
5 glazed with rain  
6 water  
7 beside the white  
8 chickens



## SUMMARY

It feels as though many things rely on the use of a red cart with a single wheel; the one I see now is sitting outside, still wet from rain, next to some white chickens.



## THEMES



### SENTIMENTALITY AND EVERYDAY OBJECTS

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is an example of something called Imagist poetry, which focuses on using language to convey vivid, precise images to the reader. While this style might make Williams's poem seem pretty vague, the speaker's focus on the red wheelbarrow suggests that the poem could very well be a sentimental meditation on the use of common objects. There is a sense of wonder—and tenderness, even—as the speaker pauses to take stock of a common, simple item whose value people rarely notice or consider.

Note how the speaker relays the scene with subtly increasing complexity: the wheelbarrow is not simply wet, but "glazed" with "rain / water." It is not just outside, but "beside the white / chickens." The continuous re-framing of the wheelbarrow suggests that the speaker is encouraging the reader to look closer at the image at hand, and that there is more than meets the eye even when regarding something as mundane as a wheelbarrow.

Much of the imagery is also described using gentle language: again, the wheelbarrow is "glazed" with water, suggesting that the wheelbarrow is in the moment of quiet that so often follows

a rainstorm; the wheelbarrow is wet, but not in a way that is overflowing with water. The chickens, too, are not noisy or flustered, as chickens are often depicted. Instead, they are simply "white," with their color drawing the most attention and suggesting that the chickens, too, are quiet in this moment.

Even the notion that "so much depends upon" the wheelbarrow is arguably a quieter assertion than it could be. If the speaker were to say something like, "my family depends upon" or "my life depends upon" a red wheelbarrow, rather than the vague "so much," the poem might get tense—suddenly, the identity of the speaker would infuse the poem with the sense of urgent individual needs, which would, essentially, decrease the value of the wheelbarrow in and of itself. Though the wheelbarrow and what depends upon it could be as vast as the whole of civilization (given that these tools have aided in farming and construction for a millennia), the language as it stands only ever softly *suggests* these things, rather than staunchly declares them.

The poem's form—stretching a single sentence over several lines—reinforces its calm, meditative tone. It pushes the reader to slow down, to linger over the wheelbarrow in the same way the speaker does. The fact that the poem lacks punctuation and capitalization further suggests that the speaker is in a thoughtful and reflective state. If the speaker were to say, "So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow!" the poem would feel much more urgent. Yet, the speaker is not necessarily evaluating the wheelbarrow's necessity so much as simply *observing* it. This observation, in turn, can be seen as a sentimental act in which the speaker regards an everyday object with a sort of reverence.

While "The Red Wheelbarrow" is ultimately representative of the Imagist ideals in its focus on a specific image rather than narrative or lyricism, it can also be seen as a celebration or even simple acknowledgment of sentimentality. Perhaps there are more objects like the red wheelbarrow, it might suggest, that are also worthy of such tender regard.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8



### NATURE, CIVILIZATION, AND AGRICULTURE

The wheelbarrow is an enduring and universal tool, used by people for thousands of years. It is most commonly associated with farming and construction—arguably, the foundation upon which civilization is built. In the poem, the wheelbarrow and its surrounding environment could also nod

*specifically* towards agricultural workers and rural communities. As such, the poem's contemplation of the wheelbarrow can be read as a meditation on the link between humanity and the natural world—as well as an assertion of the importance of respecting the latter.

While civilizations are often defined by their more complex features (such as a written language or social structure), farming and construction are the means that provide the *survival* of any society (i.e., through food). Thus, the wheelbarrow and its association with this kind of labor could represent the basic means upon which society is built.

By extension, the wheelbarrow here might be taken to represent the value of the working class. This class—the people actually performing said manual labor, such as farmers, miners, construction workers, etc.—is often stereotyped as being unskilled and unintelligent. Physical work, in general, is often misclassified as "lowly" or "simple," which ignores the complexity that goes into planting, pollinating, etc. Seeing as this work is often undervalued despite its importance to human survival, the attention given to the wheelbarrow (and, through it, the people who *use* wheelbarrows) could act as a subtle acknowledgement and celebration of the working class.

The wheelbarrow and its immediate surroundings (it's outside, next to some chickens) could also allude specifically to agricultural workers and serve as an important reminder of the significance of farmers to society. Finally, the poem's outdoor setting could also speak to the value of society working in harmony *with* nature, rather than against it.

What's more, the fact that the wheelbarrow isn't actually being *used* in the poem could represent the consequence of failing to *appreciate* the wheelbarrow (and everything it represents). Note that the wheelbarrow is "glazed with rain / water," which indicates that it is at rest. Perhaps this is because it has recently rained, preventing the owner of the wheelbarrow from using it momentarily, or it could suggest that the wheelbarrow has been neglected for some time.

Taken on a broad, symbolic level, the inactive wheelbarrow might represent the ways in which society takes laborers for granted and will only recognize their importance for the day-to-day functioning of society when they are not working—much like when trash collectors go on strike and garbage begins to pile up because no one is taking it away. The state of the wheelbarrow might also suggest a rupture in humankind's relationship with nature itself, letting the tools that work the earth sit gathering water and rust.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-7
- Lines 5-6

- Lines 7-8



### PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Throughout "The Red Wheelbarrow," the speaker insists that the reader pay closer and closer attention to a simple image. The speaker begins by announcing the importance of the image before even describing it, stating that "so much depends / upon"—and leaving the reader to briefly wonder *what* could be so important. The speaker continues the thought in the next stanza, answering the question: "a red wheel / barrow," and then spends the last two stanzas of the poem describing the wheelbarrow's state and its surroundings in increasing detail.

Beyond suggesting the importance of this specific image, the poem can also be interpreted as a meditation on the nature of *perception* in general—that is, the poem doesn't just seek to emphasize the value of this *particular* object, but also to reveal how quickly one's vision and understanding of the world can shift. Perception itself is thus presented as subjective and fallible, rather than an objective reflection of reality.

The speaker purposefully and carefully breaks apart a single image, demonstrating its complexity by adding more detail in small bites. The scene itself is not remarkable at first glance: a wheelbarrow sitting outside is something many people have likely passed without a second thought.

However, the speaker, in arguing that "so much depends upon" the red wheelbarrow, encourages the reader to look closer. And although the poem is only one sentence long, the speaker breaks the image of the wheelbarrow down into six different lines, forcing the image of the wheelbarrow to stay with the reader for longer than anticipated. It could be argued that, because of the speaker's insistence on the importance of the red wheelbarrow and the way the speaker continues to provide more and more details about the image, that perhaps the speaker intends to show the reader how to change and question their own perceptions.

While the details are slight and may not seem important, they are significant enough to the speaker that, not only are they worth mentioning, but they are worthy enough to be *the only thing mentioned*. For what reason, the reader can't be sure: perhaps it is because the wheelbarrow represents something much grander, like an entire community of overworked and undervalued farmworkers, or it is because the wheelbarrow perhaps reminds the speaker of the value of simplicity. Either way, the speaker intends for the reader to challenge their initial perception of the wheelbarrow and the scene at hand—and thus to challenge the nature of perception itself.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*so much depends  
upon*

The first two lines of the poem are its most vague, and in turn, the most suggestive. The lines are a mysterious cliffhanger: so much depends upon... what exactly? In this moment, it could be anything; four short words open up endless possibilities.

The poem's form reflects this mystery—with the [enjambment](#) creating a sense of anticipation as the poem begins to spill down the page, each line depending on the following in order for its full meaning to become clear.

The language, meanwhile, creates a casual, calm tone. For one thing, there is no capitalization or punctuation whatsoever. The speaker is not concerned with following strict grammatical rules, and keeps the initial "s" lowercase despite the fact that this is the start of the poem's single sentence. The poem's lack of capitalization contributes to the speaker's tone, creating an atmosphere of detached observation rather than urgent judgment.

The language in this first stanza also demonstrates the gentleness that pervades "The Red Wheelbarrow." The first line does indeed make a declaration, asserting that "so much depends / upon" something (soon revealed, of course, to be a red wheelbarrow), but this declaration is far softer than it *could* be. Think of it this way: if the speaker instead announced, "My life depends on my red wheelbarrow," the poem would then be decidedly more urgent! It could very well be that the speaker's life depends on this wheelbarrow, but the phrasing and grammar soften the line's impact. This is a poem concerned with reflection, not drama; with creating an image, not relaying a plot.

The first two lines also contain both [assonance](#) and [consonance](#): with the short /u/ sound (which sounds like, "uh") in the words "much" and "upon," as well as the /n/ and /p/ sounds in the words "depends" and "upon," respectively. The /u/ sound is also somewhat similar to the short /e/ sound ("eh") in the word "depends." This creates a sense of internal cohesion, the first line sonically connected to the second—even if the reader is not yet sure why.

### LINES 3-4

*a red wheel  
barrow*

The second stanza answers the question implied by the first: so much depends on... what? *A red wheelbarrow.*

Perhaps this comes as a surprise: a wheelbarrow, after all, is not exactly a shiny or high-tech piece of machinery. On the contrary, it is a very simple tool, one which few people probably ever stop to think about—let alone stop to think about how much else depends on it. That is what the speaker is implicitly doing in this poem: making people stop and consider an object that is often ignored.

Of course, the red wheelbarrow might also be acting as an [extended metaphor](#)—though, because of the poem's lack of context, for *what* is up for interpretation! Here's one possibility.

The wheelbarrow is one of humankind's most enduring tools, having been used for thousands of years by many different civilizations. The primary use of the wheelbarrow is to assist in carrying heavy loads, and is often in used in farming and construction work. The attention paid to the wheelbarrow, along with the assertion from the speaker that "so much depends upon" it, suggests that, perhaps, the wheelbarrow represents agricultural workers, such as farmers, and thus "so much depends upon" *the people who use* the wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow could also represent civilization as a whole, in that it is a tool upon which civilization has been built.

Notably, the word "wheelbarrow," is split in two by a purposeful line break. This [enjambment](#) separates the word "wheel" from "barrow," which breaks down the tool into its two different parts. This line break captures the reader's attention by subverting their expectation: the reader may think, initially, that "so much depends upon" the *wheel*, as its own entity, but this assumption is soon clarified by the "barrow" that follows. This may quietly tell the reader that perhaps they should refrain from jumping to conclusions before they have taken in all of the information that the scene—and the poem at large—has to offer! This break also contributes to the sense that the poem keeps building up; the speaker continuously enhances and complicates the image by providing more and more detail about the wheelbarrow and its surroundings.

The third line begins with an iambic foot:

a red

However, depending upon how one chooses to read the word "wheelbarrow," the syllabic rhythm may change. The word "wheelbarrow" would likely read as a [dactyl](#) were it to be on a single line:

wheelbarrow

The separation of "wheel" and "barrow," however, subtly changes the meter. The "bar" may sound much more stressed when on its own at the start of a line, with line 4 scanning as:

barrow

The lines would then read as such:

a red | wheel  
barrow

One could argue that the enjambment is in favor of this particular reading, as it highlights the importance of the wheelbarrow. By altering the way the word "wheelbarrow" by increasing its number of stressed syllables, this simultaneously draws the reader's attention to the wheelbarrow as an image, while also altering the reader's perception of the wheelbarrow—perhaps, in turn, representing the aims of the poem, as a whole, to alter the reader's perception of the everyday object.

### LINES 5-6

*glazed with rain  
water*

The speaker continues to describe the wheelbarrow, telling the reader that the tool is wet from the rain. This indicates two important details about the wheelbarrow: first, because it has been rained upon, it is likely outside; and second, the wheelbarrow is not currently being used.

The speaker describes the wheelbarrow as being "glazed" with rain, which enhances the notion of the wheelbarrow as something that is manufactured. The materials of the wheelbarrow, when wet, provide a sheen. The water from the rain and the metal of the wheelbarrow, in turn, heighten the contrast between the human and natural world.

At the same time, however, these contrasting elements also work together to create a new image: the "glazed" or metallic sheen that happens when water and metal are combined could also indicate a sense of balance or harmony that can be achieved between the natural and the material world. In this sense, the wheelbarrow almost becomes a feature of the landscape, rather than an active tool. This could further contribute to the argument that the poem is encouraging the reader to challenge their own perceptions.

The inactive wheelbarrow could also symbolize what it means when civilization takes something (or someone) for granted. If the speaker only realized how important the wheelbarrow was because the rainy weather prevented its use, and thus prevented work from being done, then the wheelbarrow in this state could represent the consequence of not having a wheelbarrow altogether. If the wheelbarrow is representative of manual laborers in general, the inactive wheelbarrow could warn against the undervaluing of the working class, for similar reasons.

Though one could assume that the wheelbarrow isn't being used because of the weather, perhaps the notion that the wheelbarrow was left outside to be rained upon suggests something is wrong with the wheelbarrow, or its user. The

wheelbarrow could, perhaps, be broken, and thus incapable of being used or moved, forced to be left out in the rain to rust. This could symbolize that the harmony between humankind and nature has experienced a rupture, or fallen into disrepair.

Lines 5 and 6 continue to use [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), with the words "glazed" and "rain," as well as "with," and "water." The similarities in sounds embody the notion of the natural and the material melding together. The /w/ sound is present throughout much of the poem and continues from lines 3 and 4's "wheel / barrow" and does similar work, as it creates a connection between the organic and the inorganic: the wheelbarrow, with water, and, later, the "white chickens," all have a sense of commonality between them.

The line "glazed with rain / water" inverts the previously iambic rhythm:

glazed | with rain

Now, the line begins with a single stressed syllable, and then returns with an iambic foot. The line following is a single [trochaic](#) foot.

water

Lines 5 and 6, unlike most of the lines previous, begins with stressed syllables, continuing a pattern that starts with line 4. In order to keep the reader's attention focused on the wheelbarrow and its surroundings, the speaker heightens the intensity of the language just a little bit, emphasizing the importance of the details.

### LINES 7-8

*beside the white  
chickens*

The poem's final lines make it very clear that the wheelbarrow is, in fact, outside, while also demonstrating the type of natural environment that surrounds it. The fact that the wheelbarrow is next to "the white chickens" implies that the wheelbarrow is on a farm of some sort, furthering the notion that the wheelbarrow could be representative of agricultural work and laborers.

The chickens, which are creatures not often associated with calmness, are merely presented as "white." They are notably not described as being agitated or noisy, but still enough that their most defining feature, in this moment, is their color. This might reflect the theme of humankind's relationship with nature: the chickens, in their tranquil state, could speak to the potential harmony between the natural and the material world, as the wheelbarrow and the chickens are able to sit "beside" one another without issue.

The white chickens also provide another instance of [juxtaposition](#): there are two starkly different colors mentioned

in the poem, the white and the red simultaneously complementing and off-setting one another. The combination of red and white could remind the reader of a barn (which are often red and white), continuing to nod towards farm workers.

Also note the [assonance](#) in the words "beside" and "white," which both feature a long, lolling /i/ vowel sound that slow down the line and contribute to the sense of tranquility. The sharp /k/ of "chickens" then ends the poem on a bit of sonic burst, drawing readers' attention to these animals, which are a domesticated element of the natural world.

The last line of the poem ends without any punctuation, which, in combination with the lack of capitalization in the first line, seems to reflect the meditative state of the speaker. Because the entire poem consists of a single sentence, it is difficult to tell until the end of the poem whether the poem will abide by *any* grammatical conventions. The fact that it does not use capital letters nor punctuation suggests a lack of judgement on the part of the speaker. Instead of *evaluating* the red wheelbarrow and its necessity, the speaker is simply *observing* it.



## SYMBOLS



### THE RED WHEELBARROW

The wheelbarrow symbolizes several different things in the poem. On the one hand, the wheelbarrow can be taken as a representation of farm life in general, especially when placed in an environment with "chickens." The fact that the wheelbarrow is also a *tool* might also indicate to the reader that the wheelbarrow is representing farm *workers* more specifically. By declaring that "so much depends upon" the wheelbarrow, then, the poem implies the importance of agriculture and farm laborers.

More broadly, the wheelbarrow can also act as a representation for any and all everyday objects that the speaker believes are deserving of appreciation. The wheelbarrow is a rather mundane item that people may overlook, and by focusing so intently on it, the poem might be suggesting the value of appreciating these simple items that make life easier.

To that end, the red wheelbarrow can also be seen as a symbol for *perception*. The speaker spends the poem altering the reader's perception of the wheelbarrow, which could suggest that the wheelbarrow is meant to demonstrate how one can—and perhaps, *should*—take a closer look at their surroundings and challenge their own perspective.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "a red wheel / barrow"



## POETIC DEVICES

### ENJAMBMENT

This short poem consists entirely of a single sentence, which is drawn out over the course of eight lines using [enjambment](#). Each line spills over into the next, creating a casual, free-flowing sensation that contributes to the poem's calm, meditative tone. Note how quickly the image would rush by were the lines not enjambed:

so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed  
with rainwater beside the white chickens

Doesn't feel quite as poetic, does it? The enjambment slows down the poem, ensuring the reader is surveying the scene with the same focus and intent as the speaker. The image described in "The Red Wheelbarrow" is not just a feature of the poem, but *is* the poem—if the reader were to skim through it, they would miss out on the poem entirely. And just as "so much depends upon a red wheel barrow," each line in the poem depends upon the line that follows for its meaning to become apparent, for the poem's image to clearly emerge.

The enjambment also works to break down the image into its various parts. The compound word "wheelbarrow," for instance, is broken into its two parts, as is the word "rainwater." The same is basically true for "white chickens": although this phrase is comprised of two words, the word "white" is an adjective describing the *color* of the chickens, and thus "white" can also be understood as being *part* of the chickens. The lines continue to break down the image into smaller pieces, suggesting the value of closely observing and appreciating simple things.

In a similar vein, the enjambment can also be thought of as complicating the image, demonstrating how even mundane objects can become complex upon further examination. The entirety of the poem describes a pretty simple, maybe even boring, scene: a wheelbarrow sitting outside. However, as the speaker continues to describe the scene, it gathers details that paint a more interesting portrait: the wheelbarrow is not simply wet but is "glazed with rain / water." The wheelbarrow is not just outside, but "beside" chickens that are "white." The scene becomes more detailed, and thus, more intimate as it goes along. The enjambment highlights these details, allotting them plenty of space on the page in order to demonstrate their importance.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "depends / upon"
- **Line 3:** "a "
- **Lines 3-4:** "wheel / barrow"
- **Line 5:** "glazed "

- **Lines 5-6:** "rain / water"
- **Line 7:** "beside"
- **Lines 7-8:** "white / chickens"

## ASSONANCE

There are several instances of [assonance](#) throughout "The Red Wheelbarrow" that add a sense of lyricism in the absence of any clear rhyme scheme, and which also draw readers' attention to certain details.

The poem's opening stanza, despite being only four words long, is filled with assonance. The short /uh/ sound repeats in "much" and "upon," while the short "eh" sound in "depends." The sounds of "so" and "upon" are also quite similar being /oh/ and /aw/ respectively, which aren't exactly assonant but nevertheless add yet another subtle sonic echo to the line.

Later, in line 5, "glazed" and "rain" both have a long /a/ vowel sound, which suggests an affinity between the two words. Indeed, the word "glazed" refers to the metallic sheen on wheelbarrow that has been *created by* the rain. This sonic connection subtly suggests to the reader that the wheelbarrow has been transformed by the rain into being a slightly different version of itself (that is, a "glazed" one).

In line 7, assonance occurs with the word "beside" and "white" both have a long /i/ vowel sound. By linking the word "beside" with the phrase "the white chickens," the speaker establishes that the wheelbarrow is deeply connected with its environment.

There are also reoccurring vowel sounds throughout "The Red Wheelbarrow," which, while perhaps not technically assonance, still echo throughout the poem. The words "chickens" and "with" both have similar short /i/ vowel sounds, while the words "so" and "barrow" both have the same long /o/ sound. These words are probably too far away from another on the page to constitute true assonance, but the poem is short enough that, when read aloud, these sounds can be clearly plucked out by the reader. The use of these similar sounds through the poem contribute to its steady, meditative pacing.

The shared sounds also signal that the image being presented is still intact. Although the image is stretched over many lines by the poem's use of [enjambment](#), these shared sounds link all these lines and help the image remain whole.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "u," "e," "e"
- **Line 2:** "u"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "i," "i"

## EXTENDED METAPHOR

The whole of "The Red Wheelbarrow" is arguably an [extended metaphor](#), in which the speaker focuses on the wheelbarrow and describes its surroundings in order to convey... well, it's unclear! "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a tricky poem to nail down simply because of how vague it is. The speaker remarks that "so much depends upon" the red wheelbarrow, but doesn't give any other information about what, or whom, depends on it.

To break down the potential metaphor here, first it's important to understand the wheelbarrow for what it is. The wheelbarrow is a tool often used by agricultural and construction workers to carry heavy loads. Because the speaker does not specify whether or not the wheelbarrow belongs to the speaker themselves, or to someone else, it could be argued that the wheelbarrow is perhaps *everyone's*—or, rather, that the wheelbarrow can represent *all* wheelbarrows.

The wheelbarrow is also a common, everyday object—many people have probably interacted with the tool in one way or another, whether they've used one for work, gardening, carrying pumpkins at a pumpkin patch, etc. Perhaps, then, the wheelbarrow is meant to represent the mundane, simple tools that make life easier. The poem could thus be suggesting that people should take a moment to better notice the world around them, including all the items that help society run smoothly.

The wheelbarrow could also be a sort of [metonym](#), standing in for the workers who actually use the wheelbarrow (such as farmers, construction workers, etc.). Because the speaker asserts that "so much depends upon" the wheelbarrow, it could be argued that the speaker is by extension acknowledging the work of manual laborers, who are often undervalued by society. The poem could thus be seen as a tribute to the working class, and also a reminder of how society could appreciate this class more.

### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

## JUXTAPOSITION

In "The Red Wheelbarrow," the speaker places different things in close proximity in order to demonstrate their differences, but also to enhance their similarity. While that may sound a bit odd, in looking at the "wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water," the speaker quietly positions the natural world against the material world.

The wheelbarrow is a tool made by people. Thus, when the wheelbarrow is presented alongside against the natural environment—rain, chickens—it might feel as though the wheelbarrow is out of place, like when someone sees a plastic bottle floating in the ocean. At the same time, however, the rain is the reason why the red wheelbarrow is "glazed." While this

does, again, highlight the difference between the two, it also melds them into a single object, both material and organic. The stationary wheelbarrow almost becomes a feature of the natural landscape.

There is also a fairly loud [juxtaposition](#) between the "red" of the wheelbarrow and the "white" of the chickens. As the only two colors mentioned in the poem, these are inevitably set against one another, their stark contrast making each seem all the more vibrant. Note, however, that white is a neutral color; thus, the red wheelbarrow continues to remain the focal point of the poem, even as the speaker introduces new detail to the image.

Even though they are described using very different colors, the fact that both these physical objects (the wheelbarrow and the chickens) are described *only* by their respective colors might suggest an affinity between them. Although one is a human tool and the other an animal, the wheelbarrow and chickens are ultimately part of the same world; they both are defined by a color, regardless of how different those colors are. Maybe this is in reference to the fact that both are used by human beings for the purposes of farming and agriculture.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-3
- Line 3
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Line 7

## IMAGERY

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is an example of Imagism. The Imagist movement in poetry sought to create clear images through words, arguing that the words in a poem should focus *solely* on constructing that image. Fittingly, then, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is filled with [imagery](#) as it seeks, almost exclusively, to construct a precise picture of the titular wheelbarrow. Despite its brevity, the poem's language makes it easy to see this wheelbarrow and to sense its importance.

The image of the red wheelbarrow is the focus of this poem—the rest of the images (the rainwater and the white chickens) work only to enhance this central image. Much like a [photomosaic](#), this gives the sensation that the central image is comprised of several smaller images. The chickens and the rain are also both elements of the natural world, while the wheelbarrow is a human-made object. The fact that they are all interwoven into the same evocative image suggests that all of these various things might also be connected on a [metaphorical](#) level. The overall image, in turn, might suggest a sense of harmony between human beings and nature.

Note also how the speaker describes the wheelbarrow as being

"glazed with rain / water," which *shows* the reader that the wheelbarrow is not being used. The speaker doesn't have to say, "No one is using the wheelbarrow right now, because it was just raining outside," and instead *shows* readers the idleness of the wheelbarrow by describing how the rain has made it shine. This, in turn, might suggest that the speaker is contemplating the wheelbarrow's usefulness specifically *because* it is not currently being used; perhaps the speaker is suggesting that the wheelbarrow has been taken for granted.

The speaker concludes the poem by mentioning that the wheelbarrow is "beside the white / chickens," which suggests that the wheelbarrow is on some sort of farmland. A brief phrase gives rise to a vast landscape in the reader's imagination, and also might grant some insight into who owns this wheelbarrow. Maybe it is owned by a farmer; by extension, perhaps the wheelbarrow is a symbol for farm work (and further still, for manual labor in general).

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-8

## CONSONANCE

The [consonance](#) in "The Red Wheelbarrow" functions much like the poem's assonance, in that it builds a sense of cohesion throughout the poem—essentially keeping the image of the wheelbarrow together even as it is stretched across many lines. In other words, sound in this poem helps construct the image being discussed.

For example, in lines 3-4, note the repeated /r/ and /w/ sounds in the phrase "red wheel / barrow." The word "wheelbarrow" is split in two by the enjambment of these lines; however, these sounds underscore that, even though the word is halved, the wheel and the barrow are still *together*, so to speak.

There are many other moments throughout the poem where the same consonant sounds appear: "with," "water," "white," and "rain." Because the image of the wheelbarrow is the focus of the poem, it could be argued that the frequent /w/ and /r/ sounds keep the reader's mind on the wheelbarrow, even when the speaker is discussing another image. This, in turn, reminds the reader that all the images that come after the wheelbarrow (the rain water and the white chickens) are all still connected to the poem's main image; this is all describing a single, cohesive scene.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "p," "n," "d"
- **Line 2:** "p," "n"
- **Line 3:** "r," "w"
- **Line 4:** "rr," "w"
- **Line 5:** "w," "r"

- **Line 6:** "w," "r"
- **Line 7:** "w"



## VOCABULARY

**Upon** (Line 2) - Upon is a more formal version of the word "on."

**Wheelbarrow** (Lines 3-4) - A wheelbarrow is a gardening and construction tool. It consists of a single wheel and a cart with two handles on either side, and is used to lift and transport heavy loads. Here, the word is broken in two words, but it is most often spelled as a compound word.

**Glazed** (Line 5) - Glazed, when used here, refers to being covered with a smooth or shiny finish. After the rainfall, the wheelbarrow is now wet, and the wetness has given the wheelbarrow a sheen.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Red Wheelbarrow" consists of four stanzas of two lines apiece; each first line has three words, and each second line just one. Even as the poem feels very calm and casual, there is a sense of internal cohesiveness. Just as the poem uses sound (via [assonance](#) and [consonance](#)) to keep the image it is describing connected even as the lines stretch further down the page, the poem's form adds to its steady, thoughtful pace.

Each stanza adds more detail to the image, while the also creating a lot of white space on the page—perhaps for the reader's imagination to run free. Notably, the poem is also written entirely in lowercase letters and lacks any punctuation. This contributes to the notion that the speaker is in a state of observation: the speaker is not judging the scene or applying grammatical norms to what is before them. All that is there is the image, unadorned, presented on its own, ready for contemplation.

If the poem intends for the reader to re-evaluate and look closer at seemingly simple surroundings, the lack of punctuation also gives the sensation that the poem goes on beyond the last line; perhaps the speaker will continue to look at everyday objects in a new and enlightened way.

### METER

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is written in [free verse](#). It sounds thoughtful and conversational, and is not bound by trying to fit into metrical conventions. This reflects the point of the poem: the speaker is constructing a precise image for the reader, and images do not have any specific meter.

Yet while it does not follow a specific meter, it is still interesting

to look at the various patterns of sound in the poem.

Line 1 can be read as being either [iambic](#) dimeter or a [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed) followed by an iamb, depending on whether you emphasize "so." The line that follows consists of a clearly iambic [foot](#):

so much depends  
upon

In either case, the poem begins with a fairly familiar sound: the English language is naturally iambic—many poems a reader encounters will have instances of iambic feet in them, whether they are written intentionally or not.

Yet in lines 3-4, the speaker uses three stresses in a row when talking specifically about the image of the wheelbarrow, placing undeniable emphasis on the main image of the poem:

a red wheel  
barrow

Lines 5-6 then both begin with stressed syllables:

glazed with rain  
water

While the first two lines are iambic, the image of the wheelbarrow and its surroundings introduces a subtly more forceful pattern. This, in turn, demonstrates the importance of the image, with the speaker making certain that the wheelbarrow remains the most prominent feature of the poem by keeping the reader focused on it via sound.

The stressed syllables also might demonstrate the shift in perspective—initially, the speaker's meter was more natural, matching with the general English language. However, upon observing the wheelbarrow, the perspective began to change.

The reader then sees a return to iambic dimeter in line 7 as the focus shifts toward another part of the landscape:

beside the white

However, unlike the first couplet, the following line ends the poem with a [trochee](#):

chickens

The double stress of "white chickens" adds a final dash of emphasis to the other object mentioned in the poem, helping the reader see the final image all the more clearly.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is written in [free verse](#), which means that it does not follow any specific rhyme scheme. This is fitting,

given that the poem also does not have a regular meter and eschews grammatical rules of capitalization and punctuation. Together, all these contribute to the poem's calm, meditative tone.

However, the poem does include several instances of [internal rhyme](#) created through [assonance](#). For example, in line 5, "glazed" and "rain" share a long /a/ vowel sound, which creates a relationship between the words (the "glazed" quality is caused by the "rain"). Later, in line 7, assonance occurs with the long /i/ vowel sound in "beside" and "white."

There are in fact many reoccurring sounds throughout "The Red Wheelbarrow," which, while not always instances of true assonance or [consonance](#), contribute to the poem's steady pacing and thematic relationships in the absence of a rhyme scheme. For example, the consonant sounds "with," "water," "white," "rain" all appear after the words "red" and "wheelbarrow" Because the image of the red wheelbarrow is the focus of the poem, and the phrase "red wheelbarrow" itself contains several /r/ and /w/ sounds, it could be argued that the continued use of words that feature /r/ and /w/ sounds keep the reader's mind on the wheelbarrow, even when the speaker is discussing another image. Thus despite the poem's casual, free flowing quality, it still *sounds* cohesive and poetic.



## SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is anonymous and rather detached, never once referring to themselves in any capacity. There is really nothing once can be sure of regarding this speaker. The reader can't even tell if the red wheelbarrow belongs to the speaker or not, nor can the reader even be sure if the speaker is looking at the wheelbarrow in the moment of the poem, reminiscing on a scene from the past, or simply conjuring an image from the speaker's own imagination.

What is clear, however, is that the speaker has a deep respect for the wheelbarrow and the work it does. The speaker slowly and deliberately explains the situation surrounding the wheelbarrow, making sure that the reader takes in every detail. The speaker begins the poem by telling the reader that "so much depends upon the red wheelbarrow," encouraging readers to examine the wheelbarrow closer so that they may see what the speaker sees.

It is clearly important to the speaker for others to consider this wheelbarrow, and perhaps, by extension, to more thoughtfully consider other seemingly mundane objects around them. Through this reverence, the reader can perhaps assume that the speaker is fairly sentimental or old-fashioned, preferring more reliable and simple machines, and respecting of humanity's ties to the natural world.



## SETTING

Though the speaker does not indicate whether or not the scene being described is literal, a memory, or perhaps all in the speaker's imagination, it can be assumed that the setting of the poem is the red wheelbarrow and its surroundings. The speaker tells the reader that the wheelbarrow is "glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens," which indicates that the wheelbarrow is outside. It could also be argued that, through the presence of the wheelbarrow and the chickens, the poem takes place on a farm, or is at least in a rural area.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

William Carlos Williams published "The Red Wheelbarrow" in his 1923 poetry collection, *Spring and All*. In this collection, the poem does not have a title, but is merely marked "XXII" (the Roman numeral for the number 22). "The Red Wheelbarrow" is considered one of the most prominent poems of the Imagist movement, which was started by Ezra Pound in the early 1900s as a reaction against the more passionate and excessive Victorian Romanticism. Imagism, by contrast, focuses on the "[hard, dry image](#)." The movement also found inspiration in the short and exact [haiku](#), as well as from ancient Greek lyricists.

Williams, along with Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and James Joyce, were considered major players in the Imagist movement. However, Williams eventually began to stray from the movement, which can be seen in his later writing. At the time, Williams felt he was overshadowed by T.S. Elliot's wildly popular *The Wasteland*, which was published the same year as *Spring and All*. Nevertheless, Williams is considered to have had a major influence on both Imagism and the later Beats poets, such as Allen Ginsburg.

Williams was also a physician, and some scholars have argued that "The Red Wheelbarrow" is actually a reference to a toy that belonged to a dying patient of his. However, Williams later revealed that the wheelbarrow belonged to an African American neighbor of his, stating, "[I suppose my affection for the old man somehow got into the writing](#)."

In any case, it is important to note that poems are often quite layered and can represent multiple ideas at once—their themes can even emerge subconsciously, as indicated by Williams demonstrating that perhaps he did not actively set out to write a poem about his neighbor. It is important to avoid basing too much literary analysis on the author's biography.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Red Wheelbarrow" was published in 1923, which, in the United States, was a period of economic and industrial growth. The 1920s, known as the "Roaring Twenties," saw an increase

in more modern appliances, such as television sets, cars, telephones, etc. being introduced to the home. This upswing in production and consumption led to significant lifestyle changes as well. For example, women gained the right to vote in the United States and became more independent than the years before.

In the context of this poem, the glitz and glamor of the 1920s hardly makes an appearance, instead focusing on a simple machine and its rural surroundings. It may seem as though the historical context did not have any impact on the poem, but it could be argued that this poem is a reaction to the economic boom of the 20s; if the reader interprets the wheelbarrow as being representative of manual laborers and farmworkers, the speaker of the poem is suggesting that the reader remember the common people who have played a significant role in the country's success. If the reader is to see the poem as a simple act of paying attention to one's surroundings, then perhaps the poem serves as a reminder to have respect for the simpler things in life, even when surrounded by flashy modern inventions.

- [What Is Imagism?](https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-imagism) – A brief history and explanation of the Imagist movement, provided by Poets.org. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-imagism>)
- [Poets on the Poem](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75547/the-poem-is-remembering-me-a-discussion-of-william-carlos-williams-the-red-wheelbarrow-and-flowers-by-the-sea) – An episode of "Poem Talk," a podcast hosted by Al Filreis, in which he and other poets (Charles Bernstein, Bob Grenier, and Bob Perelman) discuss "The Red Wheelbarrow" and other work by William Carlos Williams. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75547/the-poem-is-remembering-me-a-discussion-of-william-carlos-williams-the-red-wheelbarrow-and-flowers-by-the-sea>)
- [Inspiration for "The Red Wheelbarrow"](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/07/books/the-secret-of-william-carlos-williams-the-red-wheelbarrow.html) – A New York Times article discussing the quite literal red wheelbarrow (and its owner) that inspired the poem. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/07/books/the-secret-of-william-carlos-williams-the-red-wheelbarrow.html>)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Yarnall, Lauren. "The Red Wheelbarrow." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Yarnall, Lauren. "The Red Wheelbarrow." LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-carlos-williams/the-red-wheelbarrow>.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqll3oX_44s) – A short clip in which William Carlos Williams reads "The Red Wheelbarrow." ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqll3oX\\_44s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nqll3oX_44s))
- [William Carlos Williams's Life and Legacy](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-carlos-williams) – Biographical information about William Carlos Williams from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-carlos-williams>)