

Poetry
Professor S.P. Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
William Carlos Williams

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William Carlos Williams
(1883-1963)

- Historical and Literary Context
- William Carlos Williams
- “The Poem as a Field of Action”
- “The Red Wheelbarrow”
- “This is Just to Say”
- “Between Walls”
- Analysis



Hello. Let us discuss Williams Carlos Williams now in this lecture. He was born in 1883 and died in 1963. He was a notable contemporary of Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, T.S. Elliot and many others, especially Pound. We will see the historical and literary context, his own life. Then we will pay attention to a talk that he gave at the University of Washington. Read three of his poems, they are very short poems. So, we will read three of them, analyse them and then conclude.

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Historical and Literary Context

- The Armory Show (1913): Art Exhibition
- The First World War (1914-1918)
- The Great Depression (1929)
- The Second World War (1939-1945)
- **The popular poets:** E A Robinson and Robert Frost
- **The imagist poets:** Pound, H. D., and Marianne Moore
 1. **The Anti-Romantic poets:** influenced by Eliot
J C Ransom, Donald Davidson and Allen Tate
 2. **The Romantic poets:** opposed to Eliot
Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams



When we come to William Carlos Williams, let us add another point about the literary historical context. There was a show called The Armory Show which began in 1913 in New York, this is basically an Art Exhibition. Artists from America and artists from Europe had all assembled and displayed their art products. Many of the artists from Europe made a great impression on the American creative scene and that impacted the whole of American poetry and other art forms.

We have of course, the first world war, the second world war and the Great Depression. We have popular poets like E A Robinson and Robert Frost during this time. We have two groups of imagist poets which are found in Pound, Hilda Doolittle and Marianne Moore. They are the leaders of the imagist movement.

But we have two groups of poets in America. One group can be called Anti Romantic poets; another can be called Romantic poets. These Anti Romantic poets were influenced by Eliot; they are JC Ransom, Donald Davidson and Allen Tate. Let us recall the fugitive poets, most of them come here like Ransom and Allen Tate.

Then we have Romantic poets, these were opposed to Eliot, in technique, in theme, in attitude, outlook, in language, everything they were opposed to Eliot. We have the second group in Romantic poets who were opposed to Eliot, they are Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

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William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

- A medical doctor by profession and a poet by choice
- Initially influenced by imagism and Pound
- Later drawn to objectivism and Zukofsky
- **Credo:** "No ideas but in things;" A poem is "a little machine made out of words."
- Characterized by a pictorial quality, fragmented and loosely associated verse forms and local subject matter
- Dealt with **ordinary events, objects, and people**
- The epic poem *Paterson* in five volumes (1946-1958)
- Edited the journal *Contact* with Robert McAlmon
- Well-known for the collection *Spring and Fall* (1923)



Let us see the life of William now. He was basically a medical doctor by profession and a poet by choice. He wrote poetry throughout his life, he also practiced medicine throughout

his life. Initially, he was influenced by imagism and Ezra Pound. Later on, he was drawn to objectivism and Louis Zukofsky. His credo was “No ideas but in things.”

Further, we have his opinion on poem as “a little machine made out of words.” His poetry is characterized by a pictorial quality, fragmented and loosely associated verse forms and local subject matter. Three important points we have to remember about Williams, they are the pictorial quality, free verse, loosely associated verse forms and local subject matter.

He dealt with the ordinary events, objects and people. He also wrote an epic poem, Paterson in five volumes from 1946 to 1958. He happened to edit a journal called Contact with his colleague, Robert McAlmon. His well-known poems are found in the collection called “Spring and Fall,” published in 1923.

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The Poem as a Field of Action



- A talk given at the University of Washington in 1948
- Discussion on a distinct style of American poetry
- Incorporation of American subject and **speech**
- The subject matter of the poem is fantasy.
- The reality of the poem is its structure.
- “The poet was not an owner, he was not a money man—he was still only a poet; a wisher; a word man. The best of all to my way of thinking! **Words are the keys that unlock the mind.**”
- But there is something more in the structure of the poem, in its arrangement of words and rhythms on the page as a field of action.



Williams gave a talk on ‘the poem as a field of action’ at the University of Washington in 1948. The major crux of this talk was a discussion on a distinct style of American poetry. How could one achieve that? He emphasized the incorporation of American subject and speech. He gave more importance to the speech pattern of the common American people. The subject matter of the poem according to him is fantasy. Similarly, the reality of the poem is the structure.

To quote a sentence from this talk,

“the poet was not an owner, he was not a money man – he was still only a poet; a wisher; a word man. The best of all to

my way of thinking! **Words are the keys that
unlock the mind.”**

We can understand why language is important, why poetry is important from this statement, ‘words are the keys that unlock the mind.’

We have unravelled the secrets of nature in so many ways, but we are unable to unlock, unravel our own human mind, yet, that is why these words are important for us, or poems are important for us. William says there is something more in the structure of the poem, in its arrangement of words and rhythms on the pages as a field of action. The poetic page, the poem, itself is a field of action like any other action that we may have in nature, at home, everywhere.

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“The Red Wheelbarrow”



so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

- 16 words
- Four couplets
- Two lines each
- Three words
- One word
- Two adjectives



Let us see the first poem from William’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” one of the most popular poems in American literature. Just a small poem in eight lines, sixteen words, four couplets, two lines each, three words, one word that is how line arrangements are there. Just two adjectives, nothing more.

Let us read the poem now.

“So much depends

upon

16 words

Four couplets

a red wheel

Two lines each

barrow

Three words

glazed with rain

One word

water

Two Adjectives

beside the white

chickens.

It is almost a single sentence. There is no punctuation mark anything like that, even the first line begins with a lower case 'so' and then at the end of course, we have full stop. There is an image of the red wheel barrow, that is it, nothing else. Where is it? How is it? That is, it.

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Thematic Contrast

- Everything (so much) and Nothing
- Dependence and Independence
- Wet (glazed with rain water) and Dry
- Smooth (glossy) and Rough (dull)
- White and Black
- Red (wheelbarrow) and Colorless tools
- Man-made Tool and Natural Rain & Chickens
- Quietness and Noise



Within this short poem, we have so much of thematic contrast between everything and nothing, so much depends, then there is also nothing, dependence and independence, wet and dry, smooth and rough, white and black, red and colourless, tools. This red wheel barrow is actually a tool, a one wheeled small kind of mechanism which is used in construction industry.

We can also say this red wheeled barrow, wheeled barrow or wheeled tool and unwheeled tool, that kind of contrast also we can see. Then, manmade tool and natural rains and chickens, then quietness and noise. This is the kind of context image that the small poem evokes in us.

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Poetic Devices

- **Image:** the red wheelbarrow
- **Symbol:** of human civilization and its growth
- **Tone:** Conversational
- **Attitude:** Casual and informal
- **Syntax:** Simple; one sentence
- **Diction:** Common words
- **Register:** Rural
- **Structure:** four stanzas of two lines each;
alternation of three words and one word



Within this small poem, we will see this image, dominant image of this ‘red wheel barrow,’ it is a tool, construction tool, it is a moving kind of instrument which is used to carry objects from one place to another for the purpose of construction. This is a symbol of human civilization and growth. Without wheel, human civilization would not have grown to this extent, and that too, in construction. Civilization is closely associated with construction of homes, construction of buildings, construction of so many other things.

And then, we will see that, this poem is totally in contrast to the poems that we have read so far. We do not have much of metaphors, similes, assonance, consonance and many other things that we will find in other poems. So, we pay attention to the tone that is why Williams paid attention to the common speech patterns of American people.

The tone is conversational, the attitude is causal and informal. The syntax is very simple, just one sentence without any complicated words, they are common words that is why the diction is also simple. Then, the register is a kind of rural environment because of the presence of chickens. Then the structure is also interesting because of four stanzas of two lines each with an alternation of three words and one word.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



Rhyme: None

Repetition: No word is repeated, suggesting the uniqueness of the red wheelbarrow

Repetition of stanza: noticeable structure

Rhythm: variation of iamb and trochee

Meter: mono and di meter

so much | depends > (4 syllables and 2 feet)
upon > (2 syllables and 1 foot)
a red | wheel > (3 syllables and 1 foot)
barrow > (2 syllables and 1 foot)

Enjambment: every line is enjambed.



Obviously, we do not have any rhyme in this poem, and also, we do not have much repetition. No word is repeated suggesting the uniqueness of the red wheelbarrow. Of course, we have this repetitive structure of the same in the whole poem. The rhythm is a variation of iamb and trochee. Mostly what we have in this poem is a monometer or di meter, because single word and more than one word in a line. That is four syllables and two feet or two syllables and one foot.

Let us read these four lines again:

“So much | depends
upon
a red | wheel
barrow.”

The enjambment is found throughout the poem. Every line is enjambed. That is the kind of innovation that Williams brought about in American poetry. Such a short poem has given scope for lot of interpretations.

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Overall Impression



- The speaker describes a red wheelbarrow in a rainwater drenched condition lying quietly.
- He does not reveal what exactly depends on the barrow.
- Readers can speculate the meaning of the poem in their own ways.
- The poet perhaps wants us just to look at the picture closely.
- The observation itself is a process of discovering the object as it is in its location.
- When we pay attention minutely, probably we become the object, natural or manufactured.



Let us give our own impression. The speaker describes a red wheelbarrow in a rainwater drenched condition lying quietly. He does not reveal what exactly depends on the barrow. Readers can speculate the meaning of the poem in their own ways. The poet perhaps wants us just look at the picture closely. The observation itself is a process of discovering the object as it is in its own location.

When we pay attention minutely, probably we become the object, natural or manufactured. This meaning out of our own self and looking at something else, and becoming one with that, maybe a kind of force that is acting on the field, at home or anywhere else.

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“This is Just to Say”



I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

- 28 words
- Three stanzas
- Four lines each
- Two words
- Three words
- One word
- Three adjectives



Here is another short poem again well known, popular throughout American culture. “This is Just to Say.” Earlier, so much depends on, now, this is Just to Say; 28 words, three stanzas,

four lines each, we have alternation between two words, three words and one word, just three adjectives.

So, Williams does not pay any attention to descriptive nature of the poem, rather, he gives the object directly to us, as few words as possible let us read the poem now.

“I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast.

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold.”

The situation is a home context, husband and wife. The wife is absent, the husband comes home and eats the plums from the ice box. Something like a fridge or the prototype of a fridge and he feels sorry about it. Just expresses it. And also, he expresses his satisfaction of having tasted the plums.

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Thematic Contrast



- Sin and Forgiveness
- Crime and Confession
- Aggression and Apology
- I and You
- Dinner and Breakfast
- Sweet and Bitter
- Cold and Warm
- Delicious and Unpalatable
- Scarcity and Plenty
- A Sticky Note and a Poem



Within this poem, we have so much of thematic contrast, sin and forgiveness. Because the speaker has taken the plums without the permission or without the knowledge of his partner. Sin and forgiveness, crime and confession, aggression and apology, I and you, dinner and breakfast, sweet and bitter, cold and warm, delicious and unpalatable, scarcity and plenty; probably he wrote this poem on a piece of paper that is called a sticky note and then this note itself has become a poem.

That is exactly Williams. Very ordinary things, very ordinary events, ordinary happenings. He has made several poems out of them. Patterson is full of such many ordinary things about American people, American events.

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Poetic Devices



- **Symbol:** Plums for objects of temptation
- **Tone:** Conversational
- **Attitude:** Casual and informal
- **Syntax:** Complex; that, and which; but easy to follow
- **Diction:** Common words
- **Register:** Domestic
- **Punctuation:** None
- **Capitalization:** I and Forgive
- **Structure:** three stanzas



Here again, let us see some poetic devices. Symbol, we find in plums maybe these plums are objects of temptation. The tone is conversational and the attitude is casual and informal. The syntax is somewhat complex. Because it uses relative clauses in that which we can say it is complex but then it is easy to follow.

However, the words are very common words, and the situation is domestic, that is why the words are associated with a household, that is why we say that the register is domestic. There is no punctuation mark at all, only two words are capitalized, 'I' and 'forgive.' And the whole poem is presented to as in just three stanzas.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Rhyme: None

Repetition of adjectives: delicious, sweet, and cold

Repetition of adverb: 'so' for emphasis on taste

Rhythm: casual, common iamb

Meter: mono and di

I have | eaten → (4 syllables and 2 feet)



the plums → (2 syllables and 1 foot)

that were | in → (3 syllables and 1 foot)

the ice | box → (3 syllables and 1 foot)

and which [next stanza]

Enjambment: abundant

Now, let us see rhyme, rhythm and meter. We do not have much of rhyme in this poem, but the part of speech, adjective alone is repeated, though the individual word is not repeated. So, we have delicious, sweet and cold. These three words are found, that means three times Williams has used adjectives in this poem. Similarly, we have the repetition of adverb, and so, the emphasis is on "so" 'so tasty, so sweet.'

Then we can say that the rhythm is very common iamb rhythm in this poem, again we have only mono meter and di meter:

"I have|eaten
 the plums
that were | in
 the ice|box

and which,”

that is actually in the next stanza. Enjambment is present throughout the poem that is why we say it is full of enjambment.

We have four syllables in one line making up two feet and sometimes we have three syllables that means, we will have more than one foot, but for the sake of analysis we would say it is just one foot.

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Overall Impression

- The speaker declares that he has eaten the plums from the icebox and expresses his satisfaction that it is tasty, though he is aware that his partner may have kept the plums for her own breakfast.
- The speaker's casual attitude and informal tone is the heart of the poem which points to how people are easily tempted by something attractive.
- The speaker is aware of the feeling of the absent partner but feels helpless due to scarcity of plums or other food items due to the general crisis of the Great Depression during which the poem was written.
- We are human enough to pay attention to ourselves disregarding the needs of others.
- Williams was a doctor who served his patients tirelessly.



Again, this short poem has so much to convey to us; so much depends on the reader, using Williams poem The Red Wheelbarrow, we can say so much depends on the reader and his or her perception of the poem. To give an overall impression of this poem, let us look at these points.

The speaker declares that he has eaten the plums from the icebox and expresses his satisfaction that it is tasty, though he is aware that his partner may have kept the plums for her own breakfast. The speaker's casual attitude and informal tone is the heart of the poem which points to how people are easily tempted by something very attractive.

The speaker is aware of the feeling of the absent partner but feels helpless due to scarcity of plums or other food items due to the general crisis of the Great Depression during which the poem was written. We are human enough to pay attention to ourselves disregarding the needs of others.

Williams was a doctor who served his patients tirelessly, disregarding himself, but at home, when he was hungry, he had to disregard his own wife's needs, that is life.

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“Between Walls”

the back wings
of the



hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle

- 22 words
- Five couplets
- Two lines each
- Three words
- Two words
- One word
- Three adjectives
- Three verbs



Now, let us come to the last poem, “Between Walls.” This poem has 22 words, five couplets, two lines each, three words, two words, one-word alternation we have. We have three adjectives and three verbs, which we have underlined and highlighted.

Let us read the poem now.

“the back wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle”

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Thematic Contrast



- Front and Back
- Hospital and Forest/Desert
- Grow and Decay
- Cinders and Plants
- Nothing and Everything
- Shine and Darken
- Broken and Whole
- Green and Pale/White
- Bottle and Gourd/ Vegetable/ Fruit/ Tree/ Plant



Again, we have lot of thematic contrast in this short poem. Front and back, hospital and desert or forest, grow and decay, cinders and plants, nothing and everything, shine and darken, broken and whole, green and pale or white, bottle and gourd, that is something like a vegetable or fruit or tree or plant as opposed to this manmade bottle.

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Poetic Devices



- **Symbols:** Hospital, Cinders, and Bottle for human activities
- **Tone:** Conversational
- **Attitude:** Casual and informal
- **Syntax:** Complex; where; in which; but easy to follow
- **Diction:** Common words
- **Register:** Medical
- **Punctuation:** None
- **Structure:** five couplets



We have primary symbols in this poem. Hospitals, cinders and bottle for human activities. The tone is conversational; the attitude is causal and informal. The syntax is of course complex because it deals with a complex situation. Then we have common words and the

register is medical because it is located in the context of a hospital. Punctuation there is none and we have five couplets, five two lines in this poem.

We see three contexts in these three poems. ‘The Red Wheelbarrow,’ ‘Outside the Home,’ ‘This is Just to Say’ inside the home and then now, ‘Between Walls’ in a hospital.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Rhyme: None
Rhythm: iamb in “the back” but varies in other lines
Meter: from 2 syllables to 4 syllables

the back | wings > (3 syllables and 1 foot)
of the > (2 syllables and 1 foot)

hospi | tal where > (4 syllables and 2 feet)
nothing > (2 syllables and 1 foot)

Enjambment: throughout the poem



When we come to rhyme, rhythm and meter, we see that there is no rhyme scheme in this poem, the rhythm of this poem is iamb as we see in the back expression, but it varies from line to line. On the whole we have two syllables and four syllables base lines in this poem, so, we can say one foot and two feet, that is how we find in this poem. So, we can say mono meter or di meter. Again, the whole poem is full of enjambment. Enjambment is found throughout the poem.

“The back | wings
of the
hospi | tal where
nothing,”

so, it goes on like this.

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Overall Impression



- The poet observes a broken green bottle in pieces in the back wings of the hospital where cinders lie and where nothing will grow.
- While the poet draws the reader's attention to the broken pieces of the bottle, perhaps he also records the culture of throwing bottles on cinders, which will break the bottle into pieces.
- The phrase "broken pieces" is divided to actually show the bottle and perhaps words in pieces.
- The poet comments on the American culture of waste generation, especially in hospitals.



To give an overall impression of the poem, we can say the poet observes a broken bottle in pieces in the back wings of the hospital where cinders lie and where nothing will grow. While the poet draws the reader's attention to the broken pieces of the bottle, perhaps he also records the culture of throwing bottles on cinders, which will break the bottle into pieces.

The phrase "broken pieces" is divided to actually show the bottle and perhaps words in pieces. The poet comments on the American culture of waste generation, especially in hospitals.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- William Carlos Williams
- "The Poem as a Field of Action"
- "The Red Wheelbarrow"
- "This is Just to Say"
- "Between Walls"
- Analysis



To give a summary of our presentation on William Carlos Williams and his three poems, we can say we paid attention to the historical and literary context in which William Carlos

Williams wrote his poem. He was a doctor but then he was able to write poems, he was able to find time for writing poems on any piece of paper that he found, including this sticky note.

His concept of a poem is A Field of Action, there is some action always, he was always in action in the field, at home, in hospital, everywhere. It seems that he has delivered more than 2000 babies in his lifetime. And with this kind of experience, particularly, when he dealt with patients, terminal patients, his experience would have been really fantastic and extensive.

And with this, he observed life very closely and he has given his observations in short poems. With his vast experience, he has observed life and presented his observations in the 3 poems we have discussed: 'The Red Wheelbarrow,' 'This is Just to Say' and 'Between Walls.' We analysed the poems and gave our overall impression of the poems and the poet.

He is a truly great American poet in the tradition of Whitman, who went round the country to see the people. In this case, Williams lived in one particular place, Rutherford and he worked as a doctor; doctor of people, both mental and physical.

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Let us see the references now. Here are some references. These short poems are interesting for stylistic, linguistic analysis. So, we have many articles on these poems, on many other poems of Williams. We can see how words are put together, how words come together in a field of action to convey meanings. This is just to say, thank you!