

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Red Wheelbarrow

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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First published in 1923, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is one of those poems that most students encounter at some point in their educational career, and it’s worth returning to thereafter. At eight lines and just 16 words long, the poem is short and seemingly simple, and yet through its carefully arranged sounds and striking imagery, lends itself to endless interpretation.

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), the poem’s author, was born in Rutherford, New Jersey and began writing poetry while a student at Horace Mann High School. Wishing to pursue both his love for writing and his desire to become a doctor, he attended the University of Pennsylvania to study medicine, and there became friends with Ezra Pound, another emerging American poet. After returning to Rutherford to practice medicine, Williams began publishing his writing and short poems—often written on his prescription pads—in magazines and journals. Like Robert Frost, Williams believed in creating a distinctly American form of poetry that drew on the regular speech patterns and everyday experiences of its people. His poems are often considered to be part of the “Imagist” movement, characterized by his maxim of “no ideas but in things”—that is, one must use the things of this world in order to discuss the abstraction of ideas.

“The Red Wheelbarrow” fits firmly within this conception. Read the poem a few times aloud, taking care to note the stressed and un-stressed syllables of the words in the poem and how they work together to create an overall emotion, perhaps not found simply in the words themselves. Imagine the narrator of the poem—what kind of person might he be? Where do you think he’s telling his story, and to whom? What picture does the poem create? Can you imagine the scene in your mind? What sorts of things depend upon the red wheelbarrow? What larger pictures or abstractions might we also see from the picture that Williams paints?

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

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glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

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