Poetry Lesson #6
William Carlos Williams
The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

What's it About?

It doesn't matter if you're reading *The Red Wheelbarrow* as a 6th grade student who's brand new to poetry or as a grown up who has read a million poems, this one is something new and different either way. Maybe you are slapping your poetry book against your head, exclaiming, "Why? Why? Why?!" and feeling anxious in a way that you haven't felt since the second grade when your classmates were always able to find Waldo, and when you never could see his red striped shirt in a sea of penguins. Don't worry. In the case of *The Red Wheelbarrow*, it's as though you've already found Waldo, even before you begin reading.

William Carlos Williams was quite a rebel. *The Red Wheelbarrow* is revolutionary because of its simplicity. While many of his contemporaries were writing poems that locked meaning away like precious jewels in secret rooms, Williams wrote poems that captured ordinary moments and ordinary objects, such as a red wheelbarrow. Think of *The Red Wheelbarrow* as a painting, rather than as a Waldo puzzle. Think of it as an homage to a tool that is thousands of years old and that rarely is appreciated. You'll be writing poems about forks in no time.

So seriously, what is this poem about? It's as simple as it looks—the speaker reflects on how important a certain red wheelbarrow is. This wheelbarrow is wet from a recent rain, and there happen to be white chickens hanging out with the wheelbarrow. The End.

You see, this is a type of poetry called free verse. There are no rules of rhyme scheme or rhythm like we've seen in other poems. The whole poem is just one sentence long—divided up into four couplets. On its own, the sentence reads, "so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens."

If we break this sentence down, English class-style, we realize that the subject of the sentence is "so much," the verb of the sentence is "depends," and the direct object is "the red wheelbarrow." So, even though, "the red wheelbarrow" is the featured item of the poem's
title, it is not the subject of the sentence. Why is this important? Well, it just helps us poet detectives understand whether we should be more interested in the "so much" or in "the red wheelbarrow." What do you think?

You'll notice that there is no punctuation and that no words within the poem are capitalized. You'll also notice that, in each couplet, the first line is way longer than the second line, making it look as though the first line depends upon the second line, or as though the second line supports the first. Sometimes how a poem looks is just as important was what it says.

**Sound Check**

This poem uses enjambment (purposely having the sentence go over from one line into the next) to split the word "wheel" from the word "barrow." This makes us think about wheelbarrows more carefully. We realize that, just like the word "wheelbarrow," a wheelbarrow is composed primarily of two parts: a wheel and a barrow (the part you put stuff into). The word rainwater is also broken up, and white and chickens separated. There's probably a reason for this. What could that be?

One of the important techniques Williams uses a lot is called assonance. Assonance is the repeating of the same vowel sound. It's kind of like the cousin of rhyming (matching the ending sounds of words) and alliteration (repeating consonant sounds). Williams does this a lot: the long "a" glazed and rain, and then again in the "i" sound of beside and white. Assonance is kind of like alliteration in that it's only there to sound pretty to our ears.

To me, this poem sounds like a gentle rain that has just let up. You know the sound. There is no longer the consistent tap-tap-tap of raindrops, but there is the occasional plop of a raindrop tumbling off of a tree branch or a gutter. The world outside is still wet and dripping. There's a hushed tone in this poem that makes us want to put on our socks and tread quietly whenever we are around it. Because there aren't many words in this poem, we feel like we need to be really quiet in order to understand every one of them.

**Your Turn**

A lot of people think that W.C. Williams' poems aren't like other poems that tell stories and have to be figured out. They think his poems are more like a painting—using words to paint a picture in the reader's minds. Now use your own words to paint the mental picture of William Carlos Williams getting inspired to write _The Red Wheelbarrow_. Where is he? What does he look like? What is he seeing that leads him to write this poem? What's he thinking? What's he feeling?

**Questions**

*Pick one of the questions to answer as completely as you can.*

1. The first lines of the poem tell us that "so much depends on a red wheelbarrow." What depends on the red wheelbarrow? There might be several theories or ideas.
2. If you were to create a short YouTube video about this poem, what would it be like? How would you make it? What images, music, or ideas would you include?
3. Research wheelbarrows. Who invented them? What have they been used for throughout history? Why are they cool? Is Williams' red wheelbarrow the only famous one in the world?