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# READING POETRY

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## LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION—‘THE RED WHEELBARROW’

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Welcome to the web course in Reading Poetry.

As the title of the course indicates, this course will enable you to read poetry. You may ask: in what way will I be able to read poetry after this course? Don't I already know how to read poetry?

The answer is: well, yes and no. Everyone knows how to read poetry, since everyone encounters poetry in one way or another, even if he or she is not a student of poetry. What this course aims to achieve is to enable you to read poetry in a way other than the 'typical' ways used by laypeople to read poetry. Poetry, as you will see, is more than a collection of rhyming words. It has a variety of forms and techniques that are carefully chosen by poets. Poetry is a craft, a genre that has its unique characteristics. Ask yourself: why does a poet choose the genre of poetry? What can poetry do that other genres can't? Why would a writer choose to express an idea in a poem rather than in prose? In this course, we will read some poems and understand them in a way that enhances our appreciation for them as works of art. The course will also give you suggestions for further reading that you can use in order to apply the understanding that you have gained on poems other than the ones discussed in the course.

To begin with, let's get straight into reading poetry. Read the following poem. It is advisable to read it more than once and to note down some of your thoughts about it before you move on to the analysis given below it. There are a few questions below the poem. Try to find your own answers to these questions before reading the given analysis. **Remember, there are no right and wrong answers in poetry.** Your interpretation of a poem can be as similar to, or as different from, someone else's. The saying "we read as we are" applies even more to poetry than it does to other kinds of writing. Read from your perspective, which is the result of who you are as an individual and what your experiences have been. There is immense satisfaction in deriving your own meaning from a piece of writing. So let's start practising how to do so!

#### THE RED WHEELBARROW—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

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### QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

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1. Why doesn't the first word start with a capital 'S'?
2. Are the line breaks and stanza divisions important in some way?
3. Are there any specific words that seem particularly interesting or significant to you?

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### ANALYSIS

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Have you spent some time thinking about this poem? If not, go back and do so before you read on.

What were your initial thoughts while reading this poem? Did you wonder, "Is this even a poem?" Well, it is. What makes it a poem? Well, it *looks* like a poem: therefore, it must be a poem. Let's do a 'close reading' of this poem: a **close reading** is one in which we look at each part of the poem in detail. We won't be doing complete close readings for every poem in the course, but this one should help to get you started on the practice of close reading.

First, we have the title: the red wheelbarrow. Note how the title immediately presents a very vivid visual picture. Poems often appeal to our senses, and one of the most effective

ways in which poets present their thoughts is by giving us visual, auditory and other images that bring the poem to life. In fact, we can even go so far as to say that no poem is complete without **imagery**.

Think about the image in the title for a minute. What kind of wheelbarrow are you imagining? We know it's red, but is the paint fresh and new, or old and peeling? Does it look new, or show signs of wear? The poem will give us more clues about the object that it is about.

On to the first stanza:

*so much depends  
upon*

Yes, this is a stanza, even though it only contains four words. Why do we identify it as a stanza? We do so because the poet chose to structure it that way. Note the lack of capitalisation at the beginning of the first sentence. Poets often focus on **punctuation** in interesting ways. Sometimes they use the rules to make a point (as we will see with Shakespeare's sonnets), and sometimes they break the rules in order to make a certain point. Let's now try to focus in depth on the questions in your pre-analysis section.

First, why doesn't the first word start with a capital letter? When we start a sentence with a word that begins with a capital letter, it's clear that we're starting a new sentence. By

starting the poem with a word without an initial capital letter, Williams seems to be indicating that his sentence is a continuation of an earlier thought. He also seems to be suggesting that he is showing us only a part of a larger picture or process. We are being given a glimpse of something that we can't see completely.

2. Are the line breaks and stanza divisions important in some way?

As you must have realised, the poem is actually one single sentence: *so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens*. Would you have read these sixteen words the same way if they'd been written in the form of a prose sentence? Probably not. Notice how the points at which Williams chooses to put in his line breaks and stanza breaks guide your reading of the poem. Typically, each stanza of a poem presents an individual thought.

From time to time during the course, we'll be looking at grammatical aspects of sentence structure in order to better understand the poem. Remember that poetry is a craft, and a poem is just as much a physical object as is a table or a chair. Like any other object, a poem can be divided into its various components. To further the analogy, think of the way a table is constructed: it's made of a particular material: say wood. The wood is divided into different parts: the surface of the table and its legs. These parts are held together using nuts and bolts.

In a poem, the ‘wood’ is the words. The ‘nuts and bolts’ are the **sentence structure** and punctuation. When you understand the material and the ‘nuts and bolts’ better, you’ll be able to take a lot more away from a poem than you did when you were ‘just’ reading the poem without paying attention to the way it’s written.

The first stanza says: *so much depends / upon*. While this may seem to be a very unconventional poem, the first stanza actually follows the traditional rules of sentence structure: the sentence starts with a **subject**, “so much”, and a **verb**, “depends”. The content of this subject-verb pair also raises some intrigue about the **object** of the sentence. “So much depends upon *something*.” This *something* must be pretty important if so much depends on it.

Stanza 2:

*a red wheel*

*barrow*

Grammatically, the phrase “a red wheel barrow” is the object of this sentence. In grammar, a sentence is defined as a subject-verb pair, with the object as an optional element. Everything else in the sentence is an add-on, or something that adds extra information to the ‘main point’ of the sentence. These parts are typically **modifiers**. We’ll learn more about them as we read on.

Note how the poet splits the word 'wheelbarrow' into two. Now, this word is typically not split into two. By dividing the word in this atypical way, the poet seems to be drawing our attention to the parts of the object: the wheels are separate from the 'barrow' or the frame. This is another hint that we're looking at a macro-cosmic view of something larger. We're stripping something down to its basics: in this case, both the wheelbarrow and the sentence (and, by extension, the poem) itself. Notice how form and theme are very closely interlinked. The poet has something to say, and he's using the form of his poem to guide his readers into finding meanings in the poem. What meanings have you come up with so far? Are they similar to or different from this analysis? Are you beginning to see the poem in a different light from what you would have if you hadn't been reading this lesson?

Stanza 3:

*glazed with rain*

*water*

"Glazed" is certainly a word that stands out in this poem. In fact, it's the only unusual word that might make you reach for the dictionary. Let's think of meanings that we can associate with this word. Poets often use such **connotations** to imply certain meanings that aren't explicitly stated in the poem.

What does the word "glazed" bring to mind? There are two interesting ways in which we can examine this word. One is from the meaning aspect, and the other is from the

grammatical aspect. Meaning wise, this word is typically associated with baking and with pottery. To glaze a sweet is to coat it with syrup. To glaze a jar is to varnish it. But we also use the word in a sentence such as “my eyes were glazed over.” This is a **metaphorical** rather than **literal** meaning. Note that this meaning often has negative connotations. We say our eyes are glazed over when we’re tired or sleepy or unable to concentrate on or to understand something. By using this word, Williams is bringing in all these connotations of the word.

How do we understand this word in the context of the poem? The wheelbarrow is “glazed”. In the context of food or pottery, the object is glazed in order to make it tastier or prettier. In the poem, the word is used as a modifier rather than a verb. So, the word is used to *describe* the object rather than to show a process. It’s passive rather than active. Also, while someone glazing an object does so deliberately, here the effect of the rainwater is almost accidental. The rainwater doesn’t *intend* to glaze the wheelbarrow: or does it? Depending on how we choose to interpret it, the meaning can change. The overall effect here is to add an aspect to the way in which we first visualised the wheelbarrow. It’s shiny with rainwater. Note how this word *changes* the way in which we originally pictured the wheelbarrow. This is often something that poems do: modify our perception of their themes in some way. Form is truly guiding the meaning here.

Note that “rainwater” is another word, like “wheelbarrow”, that can be written as either one word or two. By splitting the word into two, Williams is again drawing our attention to the individual components of the object: the parts that make up the sum.



Stanza 4:

*beside the white*

*chickens*

To better understand the sentence structure, let's write it down like this:

- so much depends upon a red wheel barrow → Subject + verb + object
  - glazed with rain water → Modifier 1 (describing the wheelbarrow)
  - beside the white chickens. → Modifier 2 (describing the wheelbarrow)

As mentioned before, modifiers add descriptive information to sentences. Interestingly, the modifiers in this poem consist of exactly the same number of words as does the 'main point' section of the sentence. In fact, since 'red' is also a modifier—all **adjectives** and **adverbs** are modifiers—we can say that the descriptive parts of the sentence actually outweigh the rest. As was implied right from the start, the poem is overwhelmingly an attempt to present a vivid image of the titular object.

The last stanza presents us with another visual aspect of the picture painted by the poet: there are chickens beside the wheelbarrow. This addition immediately brings to mind the broader context of a farm, maybe in a rural area. Now the function of "so much depends" is also clearer. This wheelbarrow is probably the source of someone's livelihood.

**Contrasts** are also a common feature in poetry. There are several contrasts to be found here: the colours red and white (note the different associations or connotations that each colour has); the rural and the urban (something that is implied or not directly stated can also be a part of the poem); nature (as represented by the rain and the chickens) and technology (as represented by the wheelbarrow), and so on. There are many aspects of each word of this short poem that can be endlessly discussed. The wheel, for example, is probably the earliest and most significant invention to have influenced the technological development of the human race. By separating the word “wheel” from the word “barrow”, Williams is encouraging us to reflect on the individual meanings of both words and to think about how the two become parts of a larger whole.

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Close readings of poems are essential to all students of poetry, and to everyone who wishes to enrich their understanding of a poem. The more you think about the individual components of the ‘object’ that is the poem, the more you will be rewarded in terms of your understanding and perception.

In the remainder of this course, we will attempt to understand what poetry is, and how poems work. You are encouraged to do your own reading of secondary sources that analyse the texts that we will read, but first and most importantly, to hone your understanding of the process of reading poetry so that you can do so independently and derive your own understanding from each poem.