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Literary Theory and Writing: Reader Response Draft One
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So Much Depends Upon The Reader: A Response to William Carlos Williams

What good is a piece of literature if the reader does not connect with it? The meaning of William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is entirely dependent on how the individual reader goes through the process of interpreting its content. Williams' writing style seems to encourage the reader to analyze and suggest different readings and theories to be made about his writing. Wolfgang Iser's theory states that "the role of the reader is essential to the meaning of a literary text" (Pennington and Cordell), and Williams' poem invites the interpretation of the text by the reader. The imagery and theme shown in Williams' poem reflects the importance of gap-filling by the reader in order to deliver meaning to a literary work.

Iser's theory of reader response revolves around the concept of gap-filling in the reading of a text. The reader's interpretation finishes the job of the writer in providing meaning for the poem, therefore "the text is the product created by the author; the work is the realization of the text by the reader" (Resseguie 308). Without analysis and perception provided by the audience, the writing of the author has not reached its true potential as a literary work, and it remains as simply a text created by a writer. This means that the reader is responsible for filling the gaps of meaning through their own subjective analysis of the text. Luckily for the reader, William's "The Red Wheelbarrow" offers a lot of material to be analyzed.

Williams' use of imagery in the poem provides a strong basis for the reader to begin to fill the gaps in the writing, thus encouraging the eventual interpretation of the text. As a part of the Imagist movement, Williams focused on the importance of clear, strict language and the lack of rhyme scheme in order to form his poems. Imagist poets used free verse and focused on

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imagery in creating a scene for the reader to read and feel connected to. By providing precise wording that lacked frilly, expansive language, Williams provides a clear message that needs to be interpreted by the reader. There are no lines in the poem that may not be as important as the others, so any piece that the reader can analyze has the potential to carry the same weight as any other aspect of the poem.

The ambiguity of Williams' poems begs the individual interpretation of the reader.

Williams' poem, when read firsthand, tends to have a very mundane, or even cryptic, meaning.

Claiming that "so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow" (Williams 511) seems to prod the reader to ask the question, "why?" Why does so much depend upon the wheelbarrow? What is the wheelbarrow supposed to represent? The answers lie in the reader's thoughts. Williams' writing style allows his readers the opportunity to fill gaps in the poem's meaning, to hypothesize, and to dig deep into analysis. The only objective statement made in William's poem is that there is a key importance in the scene that is described. The reader can use the line "so much depends upon" in order to determine a sense of true meaning in importance in their analysis. While Williams leaves an ambiguous symbolism to his writing, he does provide the reader with a mission: find an interpretation of the poem that the reader believes has a sense of value and importance. In the case of this particular poem, the reader can find significance in different words.

Different interpretations of Williams' poem can provide drastically different meanings for the poem. When asked for their opinion on what the essential meaning of "The Red Wheelbarrow", there are multiple responses to be given. Firstly, the reader must determine whether the subjects in Williams' poem are actually representative of themselves or have a symbolic resonance to them. The red wheelbarrow may represent passion or even communism to

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some, the rainwater may be seen as pain or tears, and the white chickens could symbolize innocence. The readers determine and assign meaning to these subjects, creating a whole new meaning to the poem that has the power to give the work a new type of influence.

Some readers believe that the red wheelbarrow can simply mean a red wheelbarrow, and therefore analysis is required for the phrase “so much depends upon”. Therefore, meaning can be prescribed to the honest, straightforward fact that the wheelbarrow in fact represents a wheelbarrow. The meaning of the text now depends on what the work says as a whole: why is the landscape of rainwater and white chickens that Williams is describing important? Many angles can be taken. Williams could be describing the simplicity of the rural lifestyle, how so much of one’s life depends on the simple everyday elements such as chickens and the rain. Or, extending from this statement, the rural lifestyle is being praised for its importance. The average American farmer has a large impact on the economy and potential of the country, so even though a wheelbarrow may not seem like a very big deal, it is an essential need for the country to thrive. The hard work and incorporation of the wheelbarrow into one’s ordinary life could also reflect how the economy requires that hard labor and work in order for a human being to have a quality life. Through these analyses, the reader determines that “so much” does depend on these qualities. A farmer’s quality of life depends on the wheelbarrow, and so does the quality of the country as a whole.

Once the interpretation of the actual words of the text is determined, the reader then is given the responsibility to decide how the meaning they have created is supposed to affect their disposition towards the poem and its subject. What Williams has argued in his creation of the poem does not matter as much as the meaning that the audience makes out of the text when they interact with it. Does the reader actually believe that “so much depends upon a red

wheelbarrow?" It is up to their analysis to determine the answer to that question. Iser believed that "literature... means a texture of indeterminacies that invites- or rather requires- active cognitive processes" (Stein 215). Through this theory, Williams' poem cannot exist in a vacuum yet still be considered worthy of literary merit. As the reader accesses any text, they are required to ask questions and give their own interpretation rather than to simply accept the text at its foundation. Literature needs to be analyzed, and the reader's opinion and interpretation holds a large amount of stake in the meaning and value of the text. If the reader does not allow the text to be considered valuable, then the text will continue to have no value. But if the reader finds something impactful in their interpretation, the text gains meaning and a sense of value to the individual reader and even a group of readers who learn of the individual's analysis. The reader *creates* the work through this process.

The reader does not have to commit to a certain analysis each time the poem is read. New gaps can be discovered and filled each time the text is revisited, reinterpret the poem as well, and the individual can make new meanings for themselves each time they reread the poem. Reader response shows that "the continual process of reinterpretation [is] necessary to comprehend the variety of materials and perspectives offered in any work worth reading" (Stein 215). New meaning can be found in a poem each time that it is read. The reader can discover new perspectives from many different causes, such as being in a certain mindset or emotional state at the time that they read the poem, or if there has been a significant change in their life that prods them into new analysis. Each of these times of interpreting by the reader brings more and more meaning to the work, and the ability for a text to be interpreted many times over gives it a sense of literary merit.

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Reader response theory also shows the importance of the diversity of interpretations by multiple audiences. In focusing on the reader's subjective response to a poem, it provides a sense of equality among each interpretation. Many variations of interpretation are important to the work, meaning that there is no certain reader or type of analysis that reigns "correct" above another. "It is, in fact, the the variety and continuity of reader response which Iser identifies as the essential ingredient of meaning" (Stein 216). As long as a poem can be interpreted in ways that keep it culturally relevant to the reader, the poem will continue to have value and meaning. If one reader can find importance in a poem for the context of their own life, then the poem will continue to have meaning. A red wheelbarrow may not be significant for someone who interprets the wheelbarrow as simply a red wheelbarrow, but it may be significant for the industrial worker who interprets the wheelbarrow as any type of machinery that is relevant to their occupation. Meaning can mean different things to different people. Therefore it is important to have multiple readers and interpretations to continue the value of the poem.

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Without the reader to respond to a text, the text lacks a certain amount of meaning. Williams' poem sets the reader on a mission to create meaning for themselves in their interpretation. By giving the reader the power to make their own value and meaning out of a work, more perspectives and viewpoints can be highlighted and shown for their importance as well. Every analysis carries the same amount of meaning as another reader's analysis. After all, no one wants to be told how to read a poem.

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Works Cited

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