



The Red Wheelbarrow
by Neil Diamente
Elementary School Poet-in-Residence 2010

Grade Level: 1-5

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Topic: Image

Learning Objective: To introduce students to poetry using the imagist poem “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

Sequence of Activities:

Introductory Activities: 20 minutes

- Begin with the question: “Who likes poetry?” Then ask: “What is poetry?” Let the students tell you something about their understanding of poetry. You can even write that last question on the board and their responses underneath it. You might also ask: “Does it have to rhyme?” “Does it have to use punctuation? Good grammar? Does it have to be long or short?” Then ask: “What do you find in poetry?” You can offer some suggestions like colors, people, places, as well as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Then ask: “What’s an image?” List some images that the students come up with on the board.
- Introduce William Carlos Williams. Offer a brief biography (...born in Rutherford, New Jersey in 1883, he began writing poetry in school...became a doctor and delivered over 2000 babies in the Rutherford area between 1910 and 1952!). In 1923 he published a poem influenced by the Imagists. “What’s an Imagist?” you might hear or you might ask. The original Imagists believed the job of the poet was: ““To use the language of common speech, but always the exact word.” Williams wrote that a poem “must be real, not ‘realism,’ but reality itself. No ideas but in things.” Williams used ordinary language from everyday life. Write his poem on the board:

Writing Activity: 20 minutes

- Ask the students to take out a piece of paper and write the first two lines of the poem:

so much depends
upon

- Ask the students to picture a scene: from their home, their neighborhood, their bedroom, their classroom, the playground, the desert. If you want you can have them look around the room (or walk around the room for one minute) and focus on a scene.
- Ask them to select two objects (one can be a toy, a bicycle, a car; one can be an animal, a tree, a house for example). Brainstorm and list on the board compound words associated with a farm (e.g., pitchfork, barnyard, haystack). Do the same for compound words about the weather (e.g., sunshine, hailstorm, snowfall).
- Write on the board the four elements: earth, water, air, fire. Talk about the word “glazed” in the poem. It’s the only metaphor. “What does glazed mean?” Offer some synonyms (e.g., shined, gleamed). Have the class help you come up with adjectival phrases for each element (e.g., fire—burned; air—breezed; water—soaked; earth—dusty).
- Talk about the sounds in Williams’ poem. The first and second stanzas (“What’s a stanza? It can mean ‘room’ as in bedroom in Italian”) are linked by the long “o” sounds in “so” and “barrow” and by the short “uh” in “much,” “upon” and “a.” “L” and “r” are in the middle stanzas. The long vowels in “glazed with rain” match those in “beside the white.” In the last stanza, the sounds “ch” and “enz” in the last word of the poem echo the sounds in the initial line, “so much depends.”
- Point out the fact that Williams’ poem has two different colors and that they are very simple and exact. Ask the students to assign a color for each object/animal in their poem. Talk about the compound words in the poem (wheelbarrow and rainwater). “Why did he separate them? Why is there no hyphen between each word?” Talk about enjambment, how at the end of the line you don’t pause and continue to the next line, how each line, each word stands alone.
- Now point out that the poem has 4 syllables (“What’s a syllable?” if someone asks, explain) in the first line and the second to last line. Count them together. Notice how there are 2 syllables in the second line of each couplet. Point out that the only verb in the poem is “depends” which comes from the Latin “de pendere” meaning “to hang from.” So everything hangs from that verb. There will not be another verb in the poems the students will write.
- Ask the students to try to imitate the wheelbarrow poem, starting after the first two lines (so much depends/upon). Tell them they can use their object in place of the objects in Williams’ poem (i.e., a truck driver in place of wheelbarrow; sunshine in place of rainwater). Where the word “glazed” is used they should insert their own descriptive term related to one of the elements. In place of the colors in the poem they should come up with their own. What we’re going for is a kind of still life, which is a kind of painting of objects grouped into a scene. Walk around and help students who need help.

Closing Activities: 20 minutes

- Ask students to read their poems aloud or offer to read their poems for them. Alternatively, everyone could pass their poem to the right or left and each person reads their neighbor's poem. Focus on whether it's realistic or not (it's okay if it's not), just discuss the difference.
- Focus on a particular poem with an adjective which describes a particular element. Talk about revising, even revising a poem (if there's time), offering different words. Ask students to draw their scene if they want. Ask what the students learned about poetry today. "By examining an object in all of its immediacy, we can come into contact with something universal."

Further Activities:

- Williams' poem and the students' poems can be adapted to make mobiles, the counter-gravity-balancing mobiles that Alexander Calder made. Students can write the two-line stanzas on one piece of paper, cut into a smaller shape, and attach each to a mobile. They sell simple mobiles like this with clips for attaching things to each arm of the mobile or the kids can make their own (in their art class perhaps).

Materials Required:

"The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams (available at: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537>)

SAMPLE POEMS from Khalsa Montessori School (Spring 2010)

The Emerald Bullfrog

so much depends
upon

the emerald bull
frog

dripping with pond
water

on the green lily
pad

-Isabel Hausrath, 5th Grade

The Golden Apple Pie

so much depends
upon

the golden apple
pie

singed from oven
fire

beside the hungry
dog

-Remi Tuijl-Goode, 5th Grade

The Cow Pie

so much depends
upon

the green cow
pie

smothered in lime
grass

between the proud
bull's legs.

-Avery Cronyn, 5th Grade