



## Review Article

# Discerning Images in William Carlos Williams's Poem *This Is Just to Say*

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to discern the images in William Carlos Williams's poem *This Is Just to Say* that is a short poem of twelve lines. It deals with the apology of the poetic persona after the action of eating the plums that were delicious, sweet and cold. The article writer underlines some words that function as images in the poem. He tries his best to describe the images which have become the foundations for the themes of the poems. This article is significant to those who are interested in learning images in poetry.

**Keywords:** Image, poetic language, poetry, William Carlos Williams.

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## INTRODUCTION

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is best known as a modern American poet. He succeeded in making the ordinary situation and event extraordinary through the clarity and discreteness of his imagery. He was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. He began writing poetry while a student at Horace Mann High School where he made the decision to become both a writer and a doctor. He received his MD from the University of Pennsylvania, where he met and made friendship with Ezra Pound. In 1963, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* after his death.

*This is Just to Say* is an imagist poem published in 1934. This poem consists of three stanzas. Each stanza has four poetic lines or quatrains. The lines retain one, two or three words only. There are only twenty-eight words in the poem. There are only two instances of capitalization. The "I" at the beginning of line one and "Forgive" in the first line of the last stanza. This suggests the beginning of two different sentences. One of the stylistic features of this poem is that it does not employ any punctuation. The purpose of avoiding punctuation is to create a smooth flow while

reciting. This article is important for the readers who are interested in learning images in poetry.

The speaker of this poem is the first person pronoun "I". He has eaten delicious, sweet and cold plums without asking the concerned person "you". The readers can not exactly say who the concerned person was. His wife?, His mother? or Who??? The plums were kept in the icebox for breakfast. The message or note reads like this which is an apology for eating some plums: I have eaten / the plums / that were in/ the icebox/ and which / you were probably/ saving/ for breakfast/ Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold

## REVIEW OF THE POEM

Williams employs objects and domestic setting for expressing his ideas and perceptions. Atashi talks about Williams and says that "the poet believed the idea is in the thing and therefore the presence of objects rather than abstractions is strongly felt in his poems" (54). 'The plums', 'icebox' and 'breakfast' hint at the domestic and familial setting of this poem. This brief poem sounds like a note left on the table for the second person 'you' whom we can't identify easily. Whoever the second person is, the speaker wants to convey message about eating the plums. Cureton talks about this

poem and asserts “the core of the poem is strongly social/interpersonal/linear. The linguistic genre in which the poem is couched, a note, is practical, an act of communication just to say” (192). This poem deals with the problems of the universe through dealing with those of the locality. Lizotte also supports this and affirms that “Williams believed that only through the local one can come to the universal” (10). This brief poem can be taken as a small window through which the situations and events of a huge world can be viewed.

### **Image**

An image is a word or phrase related to an object, an event, a place and a person with certain features in a literary text. It appeals directly to the reader’s taste, touch, hearing, sight, smell, and feelings of the body or his / her intellect. It is thus any vivid or picturesque phrase that evokes a particular sensation in the reader's mind.

Harmon defines an image as “a literal and concrete representation of a sensory experience or of an object that can be known by one or more of the senses. A figurative image involves a turn on the literal meaning of the word” (268). An image may be literal or literary. Wales opines that “literary images are not simply decorative, but serve to defamiliarize: to reveal aspects of experience in a new light; or to reinforce theme, setting or characterization” (201). Cuddon mentions that types of images as “visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, abstract and kinaesthetic” (413). Abrams opines that “images taken collectively is imagery that is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature”(86). Kirsznner and Mandell highlight the significance of images in the poem by asserting “images enable poets to present ideas that would be difficult to convey in any other way” (649). Pugh and Johnson maintain what images do. They point out “images appeal to the senses, and invite readers to experience them primarily through their visual cues” (106). Anderson asserts that images can be used to “defamiliarize the overtly familiar to represent the world to us as though we have never seen it before” (207). The use of images expands the range of our experience. Anderson holds the view that “a good image in a poem induces something more than a superficial recognition; it resonates through the consciousness” (208).

### **Types of Images**

There are five fundamental and three specific images. They are as follows:

#### **Visual Image**

A visual image describes what we see. In literary texts, it deals with what the narrator

experiences through his eyes. The visual image may include:

- Color: red, bright orange, dull yellow, verdant green, white etc.
- Shape: square, circular, tubular, rectangular, conical etc.
- Size: miniscule, tiny, small, medium-sized, large, gigantic etc.
- Pattern: polka-dotted, striped, zigzagged, jagged, straight etc.

#### **Auditory Image**

An auditory image describes what we hear. In literary texts, it deals with what the narrator experiences through his ears. The auditory image may include:

- Enjoyable sound: beautiful music, birdsong, the voices of a chorus etc.
- Noise: the bang of a gun, the sound of a broom moving across the floor, and the sound of broken glass shattering on the hard floor etc.
- The lack of noise: describing a peaceful calm or eerie silence.

#### **Olfactory Image**

An olfactory image describes what we smell. In literary texts, it deals with what the narrator experiences through his nose. The olfactory image may include

- Fragrance: perfumes, enticing food and drink, blooming flowers etc.
- Odor: rotting trash, body odors, a stinky wet dog, dead animal’s stink etc.

#### **Gustatory Image**

A gustatory image describes what we taste. In literary texts, it deals with what the narrator experiences through his tongue. The gustatory image may include:

- Sweetness: candies, cookies, desserts etc.
- Sourness, bitterness, and tartness: lemons, limes etc.
- Saltiness: pretzels, French fries, pepperonis etc.
- Spiciness: salsas, curries etc.
- Savory: steak dinner or thick soup etc.

#### **Tactile Image**

A tactile image describes what we feel or touch. In literary texts, it deals with what the narrator experiences through his skin or touch. The tactile image may include:

- Temperature: bitter cold, humidity, mildness, stifling heat etc.
- Texture: rough, ragged, seamless, smooth etc.

- Touch: hand-holding, one's in the grass, or the feeling of starched fabric on etc.

### **Kinaesthetic Image**

A kinaesthetic image relates to learning through feeling such as a sense of body position and muscle movement. It deals with the movement or action of objects or people. It may include:

- Body movement: movement of body, hands legs etc.
- Action: walking, flapping, running, flying, skipping, swimming, bouncing etc.
- Vehicle Motion: running, jolting, bumping etc.

### **Organic Image**

An organic image is a form of poetic imagery through which a poet communicates internal sensations as well as internal emotions. The organic image may include:

- Sensation: fatigue, hunger, thirst etc.
- Emotion: fear, love, hatred, despair etc.
- Feeling: sadness, happiness, nostalgia, elation etc.

### **Abstract Image**

An abstract image is a form of imagery based on the abstract concept. It is of intellectual and theological type. Very simply, it pertains to appeal to what may be described as intellect. It may include:

- Concept: love, honesty, simplicity, humility, beauty, ugliness etc.
- Faith: God, death, spirit, divinity, eternity, immortality etc.
- Intellect: knowledge of invention, creation, analysis etc.

### **Poetry and Poetic Language**

Poetry is a flexible form of literature. It reflects the human emotions and experiences with imagination. Hudson defines poetry as "an interpretation of life through imagination and feelings" (80). Poetry makes a statement implicit through using literary devices. Poets write one thing to mean something else. Frost asserts that "poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another" (v). It is one of the ways that makes a saying literary.

Poetry drives readers to be creative through using various images. It inspires them to search for artistic beauty of language. Pugh and Johnson write that "poetry invites readers to revel in the inherent beauty of language, to luxuriate in its rhythm and flow while pondering the author's themes and insights" (93). Even the simple language can function as a literary language in poetry. Johnson and Pugh affirm that "poetic language erupts from the ordinary to

create art; the words themselves need not be esoteric as much as they must conjure vivid images, arouse fresh emotions, and spark new insights" (93). The language of poetry includes some sort of comparison to reveal divergent meanings. Pugh and Johnson consider that "poetry invigorates language so that readers can consider life's beauty and complexity through comparisons daringly fresh and unexpected" (106).

Language, which is a valuable gift of human civilization, is a way of sharing experiences and ideas, bridging the gap between individuals who have different outlooks and backgrounds. Things from the physical world are relatively simple to express; most people can visualize concepts such as "pyramid," "woman," "bus," "student" and "alligator" with little effort. Abstract concepts, however, are more intricate. The concepts "impressive," "pretty," and "scary," for example, are subjective judgments that each person interprets differently. A writer trying to convey these concepts may need to choose different or additional words to create the intended effect. A poet makes his poem rich and beautiful with the use of images. Williams has ample use of images in this poem.

### **Images in the Poem *This Is Just to Say***

The poet employs visual, tactile, gustatory and organic images in this poem. The plums are the central image of the poem. The entire poem is imagery that conveys deep sense of apology and subtle remorse for eating the plums that were kept for breakfast.

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox ( lines 1-4)

This stanza retains two common nouns: plums and icebox. The word "plums" appeals to our visual sense. The plums are fruits that are beautiful to see and delicious to taste. They are the source of temptation for the speaker in the poem. The icebox is a compound word composed of ice and box. The ice box appeals to our visual and tactile senses. It can be seen. It has a visual image; and it can be touched. It feels cold. It refers to the tactile image. The ice box is a sort of pot in which the plums were kept. The first person pronoun "I" is the speaker of the poem. He has eaten the plums. The verb "eaten" is an action verb. While eating, the speaker used his hand to hold the plums, kept the plums in the mouth, chewed them well and finished eating process. This course of action of eating with a sort of body movement indicates the kinaesthetic image.

When we focus on the context of time, after the First World War, widespread use of electricity and mass production of technological house

appliances, like refrigerator, naturally brought about a change of eating habits in the American people. The coldness of the plum in the poem is a luxury of modernism provided by the icebox.

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast (lines 5-8)

This stanza indicates that the plums were saved in the icebox for breakfast, but the speaker could not wait till the breakfast time. Why did he eat? It might be that he was highly appealed by the sight of the plums. The visual image of the plums drove him to eat them without waiting for any more or it might be that he was very hungry. His utter hunger that refers to the organic image made him eat them.

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold (lines 9-12)

This stanza contains two types of images: gustatory and tactile. The plums were delicious, sweet and cold. The adjectives “delicious” and “sweet” are predicatively used to qualify the plums. They appeal to our gustatory sense. We know the taste of things with the help of our tongue. The speaker was satisfied with their taste. They were also cold. The adjectival term “cold” appeals to our gustatory and tactile senses. The poem ends with the adjective “cold” to hint at the final confession of eating the plums without permission.

The plums that appeal to our visual sense are the objects of temptation. They symbolize any pleasurable experience that people can either embrace or delay. They are a way to explore the moral dilemma of giving in to the impulse to experience pleasure immediately versus waiting for an appropriate later time. Moreover, the plums facilitate to characterize the speaker, who is impulsive, and the listener, who is a planner.

The plums play a symbolic role. As a mode of communication, a note or letter is communication across a distance, either of time or space. The context of the poem is a household in which the writer of the note and the recipient of the note must communicate through writing because the speaker was going somewhere and he was not unable to talk to the recipient directly at the moment. This poem sounds like a piece of confession about eating the plums.

### Function of Image

The function of image in literature is to generate a vibrant and graphic presentation of a


scene that appeals to the reader’s senses. It evokes the reader’s imagination to visualize the characters and scenes in the literary piece clearly. Images serve the function of beautifying a piece of literature very well by making the scene and situation live and fresh.

### CONCLUSION

*This Is Just to Say*, which is primarily based on the imagery, appeals to our senses. It involves visual, tactile, gustatory and organic images that make it beautiful, fresh, alive and enticing. It is a brief poem that is open-ended as it can be explained and interpreted in multiple ways. It can be best understood after analyzing the images that contribute to its themes and meanings.

### Appendix-I

**This Is Just To Say**



**William Carlos Williams**

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

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