Taking A Ride On Life’s Wheelbarrow

As a child, everything this world has to offer is beautiful. Even the most basic of subjects bring color and excitement into a child’s life. While a child grows and develops, the world around constantly becomes reinforced with new meaning. According to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, cognitive development in children progresses in four separate stages: sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational (Piaget 63). The progression of the four stanzas in William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” mimic the progression of the four stages of cognitive child development, reinforcing the idea that the narrator himself is a child.

Jean Piaget’s stages of development serve as a blueprint to describe normal cognitive development from the time a child is born through adulthood. The first stage of development is known as the sensorimotor stage. This period is featured in infants from birth through eighteen months of age (Huitt 1). A child at this age cannot use words to express thoughts and feelings. Instead, they have to rely on crying and limited motor skills to consolidate their thoughts. Williams opens the poem with the only two lines in the first stanza: “so much depends / upon” (Williams 1-2). The stanza begins almost as quickly as it ends with a total of four words. The briefness of language mimics the lack of verbal understanding in a child of this age. This is possibly a way to put aside verbal communication, and instead focus on the importance of emotions through growth and development. Another characteristic of the sensorimotor stage is
the idea of object permanence (Huitt 1). Until a child is seven months old, he or she often has no concept of where an item goes when it is not in their line of sight or hidden. The line “so much depends” (Williams 1) mimics this concept by forcing importance on a seemingly unknown source. Infants only know of what is put directly in front of them. Perhaps the narrator knew all along what this item was, but seemed to forget the instant they looked away. Regardless, there is a strong pull of importance towards (what the reader will learn later) is the wheelbarrow.

The second stage of childhood cognitive development according to Piaget’s theory is known as the pre-operational stage. Children aged two through seven go through this stage between their toddler and early childhood years (Davenport 2). During this stage, children begin to think about matters more symbolically. New meaning is given to the already familiar objects and concepts around them. The second stanza in Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” reveals the next set of words: “a red wheel / barrow” (Williams 3-4). This stanza works as a continuation of the first one, and finally reveals the answer on what the narrator was so enamored with. While it seems as if the poem just started, the second stanza uncovers the subject for the poem. Williams’s choice of revealing the subject in the second stanza mimics a child’s ability to finally understand concepts during a later stage of development. Also during the pre-operational stage, a child’s use of verbal language starts to mature. Their memory and imagination develops as well, but their mental processing is dealt with in a largely non logical manner (Huitt 1). These concepts are introduced via word choice in the second stanza. For example, instead of describing the wheelbarrow plainly, Williams described the wheelbarrow as “a red wheel / barrow” (Williams 3-4). It is most like a child to describe an object with a lot of detail. Children remember small details such as color, shape, and placement. The choice of line breaks throughout these first few stanzas also mimic the awkward verbal skills of a small child of this
age. The splitting of the words “wheel / barrow” (Williams 3-4) instead of simply using the word “wheelbarrow” gives a sense that these words are new to the narrator. Though the details are small, they are enough to support the idea that the narrator is a child experiencing he pre-operational stage of development.

The next and third stage of cognitive childhood development is known as the concrete operational stage. It begins in elementary age to pre-adolescent children from ages seven through eleven. It is different from the pre-operational stage for it is characterized by the child’s ability to start demonstrating logical concrete reasoning (Huitt 1). A child during this stage becomes less focused on the self, and, instead, becomes more aware of external events. Children begin to realize that the thoughts and emotions they are feeling are completely unique and may not be shared by others (Davenport 1). The third stanza in “The Red Wheelbarrow” begins to describe that the wheelbarrow is “glazed with rain / water” (Williams 5-6). This stanza is different from the others because it is not building up to, nor revealing the subject. Instead, the narrator takes a step back and begins to describe the subject. The narrator seems to have a grasp on the idea behind the history of certain objects and the events they experience. The choice of using imagery of “glazed … rain / water” (Williams 5-6) upon the wheelbarrow paints an almost moody picture in one’s mind. The world is not always cheery and perfect; it takes a child until the concrete operational phase of cognitive development to understand this concept. The word choice between the last two words in this stanza are also interesting. A child’s vocabulary is still developing at this age. Using both “rain / water” (Williams 5-6) is almost a reiteration of the same concept. Young children constantly work to expand their verbal language skills, though it may sound awkward at first. All of these points continue to support the idea that the narrator is a child progressing through Piaget’s theory of childhood cognitive development.
The last stage of Piaget’s childhood development theory is known as the formal operational stage. This final stage is reached at age eleven and continues for the rest of the individual’s life. At this point, the individual is not a child anymore. Those who have reached the formal operational stage can finally start to logically use symbols related to abstract concepts such as algebra and science. They can formulate hypotheses, think about multiple variables, and consider possibilities (Huitt 1). They can also process abstract relationships between the objects and events around them. The fourth and last stanza in “The Red Wheelbarrow” conclude the poem with the lines: “besides the white / chickens” (Williams 7-8). This final stanza stands out from the rest of the poem. Instead of discussing or describing the wheelbarrow, the narrator chooses to describe the setting. The narrator has an understanding that the wheelbarrow impacts his or her own life. What is interesting is that the child also understands that the wheelbarrow is an element in other’s lives as well, such as “the white / chickens” (Williams 7-8). This kind of abstract and matured thinking is reminiscent of the formal operational stage of development, when individuals think beyond a basic scope of thought. Williams’s decision of mentioning chickens in the poem is also symbolic. The chicken is a common archetype for a child. A newborn chick may be taken as an archetypal representative of babies freshly brought into the world (Smith and Daniel 321). The fact that the narrator points out the chickens could be a realization that he is not as young as he used to be. Once again, the narrator demonstrates abstract and reflective thinking characteristic of the formal operational stage of cognitive childhood development.

In conclusion, a child goes through a lot of development throughout their life. Williams Carlos Williams’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” beautifully demonstrates Jean Piaget’s four stages of childhood cognitive development. Each stanza perfectly illustrates the
progression of the stages in chronological order while reinforcing the idea that the narrator is a child. It is fascinating to watch how children absorb their surroundings as they grow and develop. Much like how the narrator viewed the wheelbarrow, one can go back and look at the same object throughout their life, and it would be different every time.
Works Cited

2. Web.


