

## The Great Figure

William Carlos Williams

**William Carlos Williams** was a 20th-century American poet whose poetry, along with that of other **modernist** and **imager** poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, was radically different from the more flowery **Romantic** and **Victorian** poetry that preceded it. **Imager** poetry attempts to capture the essence of its subjects by painting a vivid picture with simple, brief, direct language, stripped of the long-winded figurative descriptions characteristic of some schools of poetry. In its descriptions of everyday things, it seeks to reveal the power of the ordinary, to show the significance of things that we take for granted, and to renew the vitality of language. Consider this context as you read and think about this poem.

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
    in gold  
    on a red  
    firetruck  
    moving tense  
    unheeded  
    to gong clangs  
    siren howls  
    and wheels rumbling  
    through the dark city.

### Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Read the poem aloud, listen to the way it sounds, and form a mental picture of what it describes. What feelings do the poem's **imager** and sounds evoke? What **sound devices** are present? Cite specific examples to show how these images and sounds are related to the feelings evoked by the poem.
2. Consider the **form** of the poem (**structure**, **meter**, **rhyme scheme**—or *lack* of these elements). In what ways does the poem's form contribute to its effect and to its meaning?
3. How would you describe the **tone** of the poem (the author's attitude toward the subject)? Discuss specific details that develop this tone.
4. What is "the great figure"? In what senses might it be thought of as *great*?
5. Why is the firetruck's movement "tense" (line 7)? Why is it "unheeded" (line 8), and what is significant about this fact? Think about what a firetruck's movement and sirens imply.
6. Given all of these factors, how would you explain the **purpose** and **meaning** of the poem?