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The Duality of Wallace Stevens

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

August 2008

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis  
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English  
Stony Brook University  
2008

This thesis finds conclusive evidence that the dualistic existence of Wallace Stevens had a direct influence of his poetry and prose. Specifically, his dichotomous state of being between the real and the surreal inspired Stevens to write poetry that advocated the importance of the imagination in everyday life in order to view the world with a pure perspective. The argument is substantiated by the premier Stevens' scholars of the last thirty years including Helen Vendler, Tony Sharpe, and Charles M. Murphy, as well as selected excerpts from Stevens' own poetry, journal writings, letters, and essays.

I argue that Wallace Stevens' message of dichotomous balance was influenced by experiences he had in life. Also, his personal philosophy consistently matches each work of poetry and prose throughout his literary career.

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## The Duality of Wallace Stevens

In the same fashion as most writers, the prose and verse of Wallace Stevens has a direct correlation with his life and times. As a major poetic voice of the early twentieth century, Stevens serves as a distinct icon of a dualistic nature that most everyone possesses. However, the reason for his uniqueness lies in his prominent voice and enunciated style that together typified natural dichotomy as something to embrace. As an average, ordinary businessman living a basic life in the northeast of the United States, Wallace Stevens had a paradoxical existence that allowed him to move away from the mundane and embrace the fantastical. This dichotomy ultimately forced Stevens to make a bridge between the two poles that connected his concrete reality to the surreal imagination to produce a balanced equilibrium of human existence.

Writer Dana Gioia once wrote “everyone enjoys stories of double lives and secret identities. Children have Superman; intellectuals have Wallace Stevens” (12).

Arguably one of the great “imaginative forces” of the early twentieth century, Wallace Stevens’ artistic work and professional life stood as a premier foundation for his contemporary poetic ideology and philosophy. Moreover, “compared to other poets, he was extraordinarily self-effacing” (Ellmann 279). In comparison to other major idiosyncratic writers of his day like Eliot and Pound, his exclusive contradiction of sorts inevitably leads the reader to wonder why he chose to live a double life, specifically in the quiet, enigmatic light that most people retrospectively see him today.

“Wallace Stevens led a nomadic life, wide ranging and forever exploratory of unknown lands and exotic destinations” (Murphy 21). However, the exploratory aspect of

his life only really came from within. Born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania to commonplace parents, Stevens grew up in a somewhat isolated rural environment. His childhood could be described as nothing other than ordinary, without any real controversy whatsoever. His father, Garrett Stevens, was solitary and cold, a successful attorney who emphasized education and practicality throughout Stevens' life. As with most sons, Stevens' father was a tremendous influence in his life, so far as to practically dictate what Wallace would be (professionally) and how he should manage his affairs (financially). As Frank Doggett writes in Wallace Stevens: A Celebration "Garrett Stevens offers considerable assistance in deciphering what Wallace Stevens was like" (46). It would be his father who recommended that Wallace go to Harvard to further his education. It would also be Garrett who emphasized the need to have a steady job and to make sure that money would never be a problem. And much like his father, Wallace Stevens never swayed from the practical aspects of life. In fact, he took immense pride in his job, from his early twenties up until the time of his death. As his daughter Holly recalls in her account Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens, "my father chose not to retire from the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company where he processed surety claims from 1916 to his death in 1955. . . In *Who's Who in America*, he listed his profession as 'insurance,' and his promotion in 1934 to Vice President of the firm was a matter of great pride" (25).

Because of his father's extreme devotion to pragmatism, it is sometimes argued that Stevens' mother was the possible influential reason for his duality. However, after close examination of his letters and memoirs, there is no direct evidence to say that this is

true. Ironically, there is more proof that his father contributed to his duality; in the letters his father sometimes suggested that while practicality should be the primary concern, one should never forget one's "other side." One example of a letter that his father sent to him in the fall of 1897 supports the possible dualistic influence:

A little romance is essential to ecstasy. We are all selfish—Self Denial doesn't seem to be a good thing excepting in others—the world holds an unoccupied niche only for those who climb up—work and study, study and work—are worth a decade of dreams—and romantic notions—but I do not believe in being so thoroughly practical that what is beautiful, what is artistic—what is delicate or what is grand—must always be deferred to what is useful (Letters 24).

This letter was written to Stevens when he was eighteen years old. At the time, Stevens was embarking on a plan to further his education in hopes of becoming a lawyer.

However, as most young adults, he had doubts about his future and questioned whether becoming a professional and dismissing his poetry would lead to happiness (Sharpe 30).

In a truest sense of dichotomy, his practical and rigid father essentially advised his young son that it's possible to hold a dualistic nature in life, so long as one aspect does not overrun the other.

Around the same time as this letter, Wallace Stevens also became an avid writer in his journal. In June of 1900, at the age of twenty-one, Wallace wrote about the struggles of getting older and fulfilling personal dreams. The following passage revolves around his decision to go to New York City in order to begin his professional career. In the entry, he makes references to "dreams" and "reality," and he decides how to resolve the conflict of dualistic extremities in life.



It seems to me to be the only way, directed as I am more or less strongly by the hopes and desires of my parents and myself, of realizing to the last degree any of the ambitions I have formed. I should be content to dream along to the end of my life—and opposing moralists be hanged. At the same time I should be quite as content to work and be practical—but I hate the conflict whether it “avails” or not. . . I must not try to be a dilettante—half dream, half deed. I must be all dream or all deed (Letters 34).

This particular journal entry is fascinating because of Stevens’ reluctance to reach a median between the two extremities. As Tony Sharpe suggests in his book, Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life, this reluctance to compromise his passions is probably a direct result of immaturity. However, as Stevens grew into an adult and sharpened his sense of the world around him, the settlement between reality and imagination would obviously come to be. If anything, becoming a “dilettante—half dream, half deed” would ultimately serve as the best scenario for this prominent poet.

In June of 1900, during his last year of college at Harvard, a young Stevens wrote in his journal about the struggle of being an imperfect human being. Far before he achieved balance between the two sides of his nature, he wrote about problems that are just as common as anyone else’s. This specific entry concerns questions about his professional future:

I spent the afternoon in my room, having a rather sad time with my thoughts. Have been wondering whether I am going into the right thing after all. Is literature really a profession? Can you single it out, or must you let it decide in you and for yourself? I have determined upon one thing, and that is not to try to suit anybody except myself (Letters 74).

Throughout his journal entries, “sad times” with his thoughts were always constant. In this case, Stevens’ predicament over profession serves as another telling example of what makes him human, and also what made him the man he was when he reached literary fame. Not trying “to suit anybody except myself” is a bold and real statement made by a

young man who is concerned with his future. And while it served to work out for him in so many ways, the humanistic selfishness portrayed in the statement comes forth just as loudly. To appreciate Stevens is to allow fault in his personality, as well as to admire what he symbolized throughout his life.

As Stevens progressed in his life, he saw the balance maintained. When he lived in New York City and later in Connecticut, it was always his primary responsibility to make sure his professional livelihood was secure. In his unpublished essay entitled "Insurance and Social Change," Stevens wrote about the importance of his job in the business world. Basically, he took the same principles evident in his poetry and applied them to the practical world of work and responsibility: "The significance of a business is not wholly an affair of its statistics. This note is written lightly and is intended to touch the imagination, because that seems to be the best way to come quickly to the point. Insurance is the most easily understood geometry for calculating how to bring the thing about. It helps us to see the actual world to visualize a fantastic world" (Stevens 793). With this quote, it is possible to conceive that Stevens' job was a lot more imaginatively fulfilling than what others have assumed. As for his artistic poetic side, even after he became nationally published, it was only to be satisfied in his recreational time, specifically after work. Reading and writing would conclusively be Wallace Stevens' saving grace, so much in fact that later on it would cause a major strain between him and his wife, and, sequentially, his daughter Holly (Sharpe 53-60). Unfortunately, the decisive compromise in his life would be an individually, spiritually sound existence in place of human interaction and intimacy. And while none of the negative journal records

of Stevens' relationship with his wife or daughter exist, by their account, Stevens' reluctance to open his world to his family would remain a problem until the time of his death (Sharpe 192). However, as William Van O'Connor wrote in his study of Stevens, The Shaping Spirit, perhaps it was his imperfection or sameness to everyone else that makes him to attractive to the common man.

To further portray Stevens' acceptance of being an imperfect human, it is interesting to read and analyze another unpublished, business-related essay "Surety and Fidelity Claims" where he writes about the dilemma of work, and how it may hinder a person's motivation in life:

A man in the home office tends to conduct his business on the basis of the papers that come before him. After twenty-five years or more of that sort of thing, he finds it difficult sometimes to distinguish himself from the papers he handles and comes almost to believe that he and his papers constitute a single creature, consisting principally of hands and eyes; lots of hands and eyes. Fortunately, this singular creature yields to more mature types. . .the truth is that the most conspicuous element from the point of view of human interest in the handling of claims is the claim man himself (799).

Because of the exhaustive and tenuous tone this passage projects, it is a safe assumption to say that Wallace Stevens was nothing without his poetry. The "claim man himself" only emphasizes what Stevens believed was the most important entity of life, namely the individual.

As nourishment for his artistic needs, Stevens' experiences never came from elaborate trips or eccentric behavior. While he occasionally traveled for business, Stevens never left the United States except for one trip to Canada and another to Cuba. "Regular vacations to Florida, some business trips, forays into New York City—that's about all

there was” (Murphy 21). He was also awkwardly shy and socially timid in nature, despite being six feet tall, and weighing over two hundred pounds. Instead of joining others in social gatherings, he cherished his solitude and would keep to himself for most of his life. And despite all of this, his perception of reality remained unchanged. Never exuding hatred or ambivalence to humanity, his message remained clear: appreciate life and the natural world through poetry.

As he matured into a successful businessman, Stevens never presented himself as a literary figure to his business associates” (Ellmann 279). According to Tony Sharpe, “the myth of a bifurcated life came into being, not wholly discouraged by Stevens himself; as when he told a correspondent that he tried to maintain a definite line between poetry and business, or when he cautioned a young scholar of his acquaintance. . .that ‘we don’t talk poetry here’” (2). While the imagination captivated his mind, pragmatism and practicality overwhelmed his existence. Unlike the stereotypical views of the ‘eccentric poet,’ Stevens lived his life in a typical and private way. “He led a quiet, normal, but full life. He worked hard at his business; he read; he wrote poems; and he regularly corresponded with a variety of men and women who shared his interest in all the arts” (Ellmann 280). Even at the peak of his poetic career (1947-1955), during which he won many awards including the Pulitzer Prize (1955), there were virtually no signs in his life of any celebrity status or fame. Day by day, he worked for a living commuting to Hartford, Connecticut from a “relatively unremarkable house in Elizabeth Park” (Sharpe, viii). In his professional career he was successful enough to become moderately wealthy without any financial worries, all while making a name for himself as the vice-president

of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. And while sometimes mundane notions of regularity can stifle a person's creativity, Stevens flourished under these circumstances. "His life, although it may seem short on events, was a feast of the imagination, a feast he shared with all who knew his poems" (Ellmann 281). For this reason, his popularity stills exists. In 1950, William Van O'Connor, a critic Stevens had encountered, published The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens. Inside his work, O'Connor sheds light on why people are drawn to his compositions:

There is nothing especially strange about a poet like Stevens dividing his life between insurance and poetry. Other poets also lived in a middle-class world, as doctors or teachers or employees in publishing houses. They managed to live like Stevens with a foot in each world, but he, a great poet, and successful insurance man seems to dramatize in an ironic fashion the brink between the world of the poet and the world of business. Also the substance and manner of his poetry appear incongruous against the middle-class business world in which Stevens lived (4).

Charles M. Murphy's book entitled Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age, thoroughly supports the notion of Stevens' necessary paradoxical structure in combining reality with the imagination, thereby making Stevens' poetry absolutely essential for his survival. For Stevens, poetry was "...affair of the heart, a vital enterprise" (Murphy, 1). In accordance with this suggestion, poetry was the guide to his own life, a way to rediscover "how to live, what to do." From those that knew him, it seemed his life was a never-ending series of "meditations, hard-thinking, reading, and observing" (1). All of this was obviously necessary in order to appreciate the surrounding world.

This "fresh, spiritual" approach, however, was not an easy thing for Stevens to accomplish. Ironically, Stevens did not fully believe every man was capable of attaining this enlightenment. In fact, Stevens went so far as to say that most people lacked spiritual

direction, thereby making their own lives a daunting circumstance. He believed that human existence could be characterized as “poor, that is to say, deprived of imagination and nobility. Thus he wrote his poems not to impoverish it further by simply reflecting the prevailing skepticism and rationalism, but rather to enrich it and liberate it from these structures”(2). Living in a time of great philosophical transition, the concept that life may be meaningless was not unfamiliar to Stevens. As an American man who ignored organized religion, and did not truly advocate genuine patriotism, this “mental expatriate” did not have much to hold onto except his own mind (Sharpe 16). And like most people, faith was an issue that was to confront him for remainder of his life. To some, his personal tendencies to rely on his writing as the only “truth” isolated other people in a social context.

In Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life, Tony Sharpe makes a startling but believable hypothesis that Stevens’ perception of his wife suited him more than the actual person. And while Stevens was seemingly content with his marriage, it was his wife Elsie who paid the isolated price of being married to a man whose reality only came from what he perceived. In his first set of published poems, Stevens wrote a poem called “Tea” where he was said to have used his wife as his “muse”:

When the elephant’s-ear in the park  
 Shrivelled in frost,  
 And the leaves on the paths  
 Ran like rats,  
 Your lamp-light fell  
 On shining pillows,  
 Of sea-shades and sky-shades,  
 Like umbrellas in Java (Stevens 77).

As Sharpe denotes, “the poem [“tea”] may have been *about* Elsie, but it was no longer written *for* her” (64). In other words, Stevens painted a picture of what Elsie was like in his mind (“Your lamp-light fell on shining pillows”) even though this romantic sequence of his beloved waiting for him to return from the park never really occurred. If anything, his work created a bulwark between him and Elsie, a wall that would never be torn down. Unfortunately for Elsie, she did not value any of her husband’s habits of observation, thought, and poetry. And while his life ideology of reality had its advantages artistically and philosophically, all of those who were close to Stevens suffered in his shadow. After reading the vast majority of his collected prose and verse, it can be conjectured that Stevens had no idea or no care at all that he was ostracizing himself from everyone in his life in the process of becoming a giant in the literary pantheon.

The unusual duality between his “normal” mundane routine as a business executive and his prestigious career as a major poet basically leads to questions of Stevens’ own happiness, motivation, and beliefs. It would seem legitimate to ask if Stevens ever felt satisfied in this dichotomous state, or was he truly the embodiment of what every “mentally healthy” person should try to achieve in a life? After all, the imaginative forces of humankind cannot usually be channeled into a reality with limits, boundaries, rules, and consequences. Many times, Stevens was quoted as saying “I have no life except in poetry.” Does this mean that there’s no more to life than actual reality, and that the human imagination is necessary to balance the pragmatic actuality that everyone must accept? Or perhaps it is a statement made by a man who was entirely dissatisfied with his ordinary life and whose only escape was his writing, which

ultimately served as an antidote to a life in which he felt trapped. In either case, his body of work is truly definitive and directly connected to every person who may struggle with the perception of what the “human experience” really means.

Throughout his life, Stevens never veered from his positive notions of what life should be like. His poetry and work always revolved around the importance of the imagination and the amazingly beneficial effects it can have on a human life. The “heart of reality” came in the awareness the “reality and imagination complex” (Murphy, 4).

Charles M. Murphy, author of Wallace Stevens: A Spiritual Poet in a Secular Age, further supports the constructive entities of Stevens’ poetry through the explanation of his ideologies of each side:

Reality refers to our everyday existence which in fact is a form of unreality. It’s not merely that we tend to live only on the surface and attend only to appearances; it’s rather the bigger and far more difficult problem of breaking out of a purely human-centered way of thinking. We fail to grasp in our self-enclosed world that the universe does not center itself upon us and our concerns. We need a fresh perspective; this is what Stevens calls imagination. Imagination, he says, is like a walk in space, something that lifts us up to see life freshly. It allows us to discard old definitions of things thoughtlessly accepted, “the rotten names,” he calls them (5).

The reality and imagination complex suggests that people should confront the question Stevens asks in his poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” which is also stressed at the end of Murphy’s explanation: “You as you are? / You are yourself” (Stevens 135). In order to live, the imagination becomes the guiding force to understanding reality. It is not enough to simply walk through life without ever questioning one’s own perception or who one is, or what one may be. Furthermore, Murphy explains that “imagination is another word for sensibility, an acquired way of feeling and connecting, an ability to



perceive and interact, to make vital contact” (5). The connection he writes about revolves around the imagination and the soul of a human being, which allows people to realize that “things are always more than they seem, only we have to shaken up in order to realize it” (5).

In 1966, eleven years after Stevens’ death, his only daughter Holly published a book called Letters of Wallace Stevens, which compiled the vast majority of letters Stevens wrote to his family and friends over the years. In one letter, Stevens once told his daughter “none of the great things in life have anything to do with making your living” (Brazeau 10). To echo Stevens’ advice, Murphy goes one step further in explaining why Stevens’ work should be the criterion for an enlightened person: “How Stevens managed to cultivate a rich inner life and live his life on a reflective plane that transcended office and domestic routines makes him very relevant to us” (7).

In order to relate this concept to his audience, Stevens concentrated on two important aspects while writing poetry. These were ultimately broken into two phases: his early poems and his later ones. “The poetry of the first phase concentrates with gusto upon the physical world we inhabit and our terrestrial existence with all its tragic beauty. The latter poems are a departure, more introspective, the poet confronting himself and his unfulfilled desires”(7). When these two stages are realized, the reader can fully appreciate the ongoing importance of his theories, while also understanding that he was human like everyone else. In other words, Stevens’ poetry is both surreal (philosophical understanding for the lost) and real (the practical conclusion that Stevens can be just as lost as everyone else). And while some may look at this juxtaposition as a contradiction,

if anything, Stevens' progression in writing perfectly supports his notion of what it means to be human: perfectly imperfect, "sensibly ecstatic" (Sharpe, viii).

In the compilation, Wallace Stevens: A Celebration, Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel put together essays from critics who have read and researched the works of Wallace Stevens. Richard Ellmann's essay "How Wallace Stevens Saw Himself," looks within the mind of the poet regarding the way he wanted to present himself to the people that knew and read him. Ellmann is quick to write about Stevens' reality-imagination complex. According to Ellmann, Stevens once said, "My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others" (152). In a sense, this portrays Stevens as a man who sees the potential in everyone to experience a full life. Ellmann also goes on to provide quotes from Stevens that explain the importance of imagery in the world. "When we try to picture what we see, the purely imaginary is transcended"(156). In essence, the picture should only be seen through the lens (pure unbiased imagination) if one wants to see true imagery. This point made by Stevens could also be directly correlated to a comment his father once made in terms of his own perception of reality. Of people, Garrett Stevens once said: ". . .that when we try to say what we see, we do so through our imagination because of the strong pressure of reality" (157). Perhaps the strong pressure of reality is exactly what Wallace Stevens is trying to avoid in his poetry.

The major reason for Ellmann emphasizing these specific ideas is to connect them with the poetry of Stevens. In 1923, Wallace Stevens published his first collection of poetry, *Harmonium*. This set of poetry exemplifies the first phase of Stevens' work,

namely to see the world through the lens of the imagination. A perfect example of this can be seen in his poem “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”:

The houses are haunted  
 By white night gowns,  
 None are green,  
 Or purple with green rings,  
 Or green with yellow rings,  
 Or yellow with blue rings.  
 None of them are strange,  
 With socks of lace  
 And beaded ceintures.  
 People are not going  
 to dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
 Only, here and there, and old sailor,  
 Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
 Catches tigers  
 In red weather (Stevens 52).

In the case of this poem, true reality only belongs to the sailor “drunk and asleep in his boots who catches tigers in red weather.” Everyone else misses the central philosophy that Stevens preaches, only this time, the point is made by vivid imagery involving various vivid colors easily pictured in the minds of the readers. Robert Pack comments, “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” contrasts people who ‘are not going/ to dream of baboons and periwinkles with the sailor. . . The inability of these people to live in the colored world of the imagination, to be ghosts dressed in ‘purple with green rings,’ is their disillusionment.” This statement is purposely ironic because Stevens would be better suited as someone who preferred the so-called “societal disillusionment,” (the surreal) then the practical, supposedly satisfied complacency (reality) people are exposed to everyday.

Introverted in manner, and spiritual throughout his life, Wallace Stevens stressed “that the poet must rediscover the earth” (Ellmann 279). One of his major focal points in life was the appreciation of the natural world. Stevens’ life and work was built around the idea that “just what the world is, is not always so plain” (280). Therefore, it is the responsibility of every man to *create* his own existence based on *perception*. This conclusion would serve as the foundation of Stevens’ personal philosophy and literary career: perception of reality must solely derive from the use of the human imagination. And, as Ellmann writes in the second edition of The Norton Anthology for Modern Poetry, “precisely what is the domain of the imagination, and what that of the world, is a question that Stevens prefers to keep asking and answering” (280). This tension produces Stevens’ verse, characterized as “virtual reality, born of a lonely impulse of delight whose value is, precisely, to have no status in the world of causes and effects (whether logical or mechanical)” (Sharpe, 195). Only the imaginative perception prevails as the guardian of what the natural world means.

In order to answer his question, Stevens introduces the poet as a messenger for the human experience. To Stevens, the poet is the translating force who is cognizant of the natural world, as well as the person able to harness the human imagination and eloquently define what it is in language we can understand. As Stevens explains himself in his compilation of essays entitled The Necessary Angel, “What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (138). In the beginning of his most famous essay

“Imagination as Value” he attempts to define imagination. In terms of what it is and what it could offer to humankind, Stevens agrees with the philosopher Pascal in determining that the imagination, “disposes all things and that it is the imagination that creates beauty, justice and happiness” (Stevens 725). Therefore, the imagination is “the power of the mind over the possibilities of things.” To give himself a definition that closely links itself to reality, Stevens uses the words of Ernest Cassirer and his work entitled “An Essay on Man”:

In romantic thought the theory of poetic imagination had reached its climax. Imagination is no longer that special human activity which builds up the human world of art. It now has a universal metaphysical value. Poetic imagination is the only clue to reality. Fichte’s idealism is based upon his conception of the productive imagination (Stevens 726).

Cassirer’s excerpt concludes that the imagination is not just an alternate state of the mind that allows men to conjure up images of artistic value; it is also a gateway to reality. The imagination becomes the only possible way to truly perceive reality and the world of the individual. Stevens accepts this principle and expands upon the importance of the imagination. “The imagination is one of the greatest human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind” (727). Because a human being “lives in the mind,” Stevens labels the imagination the “greatest human power” and the necessary entity for interpreting life. The “supreme fictions” that Stevens speaks of become the motivational tool crucial to appreciate the familiar and commonplace world for what it actually is. Therefore, Stevens thoroughly believed that the human imagination is the essential ingredient to enlighten a person to this phenomenon, thereby eliminating the ordinary, mundane feeling that may hinder a person’s life. As Stevens

once explained, “Logically, I ought to believe in essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination” (Ellmann, 280). In other words, the creative perception is the only necessity the imagination serves; otherwise, there is no useful reason for possessing one.

In using art as an example of what he means, Stevens specifically brings up James Joyce and Pablo Picasso to further support his thesis: “It is often true that what is most rational appears to be the most imaginative, as in the case of Picasso. . . it is often true, also, that what is most imaginative appears to be the most rational, as in the case of Joyce. Life is hard and dear and it is the hardness that makes it dear” (Stevens 730). What was deemed as a drastic and unorthodox interpretation of reality in the beginning of the twentieth century by most people turned out to be the reason why Picasso and Joyce are considered great artists. In his paintings, Picasso *intentionally* distorted his reality in an imaginative way to make it real, and Joyce deliberately made his “stream of consciousness” imaginative prose into what is supposed to be reality. In either case, “the hardness” that Stevens speaks of is the *process* these two artists went through to challenge reality; and their interpretation is what made them great.

In order to explain what is meant by his reasoning, Stevens also gives an anecdote in “Imagination as Value” to exemplify what the imagination can do for the perception of reality:

I know an Italian who was a shepherd in Italy as a boy. He described his day’s work. He said that at evening he was so tired he would lie down under a tree like a dog. This image was, of course, an image of his own dog. It was easy for him to say how tired he was by using the image of his tired dog. But given another mind, given the mind of a

man of strong powers, accustomed to thought, accustomed to the essays of the imagination, and the whole imaginative substance changes. It is as if one could say that the imagination lives as the mind lives. The primitivism disappears. The Platonic resolution of diversity disappears. The world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image. In the last analysis, it is with this image of the world that we are vitally concerned (151).

If anything, the essence of the Italian imagining that he was a tired dog is more real than him being a tired human, or him just using a basic simile to explain his fatigue. In Stevens' world of imaginative perception, the shepherd *is* the tired dog, and that is all that matters. According to Stevens, connecting the image to reality is the strongest power a man can have and will ultimately give meaning to his life and reality. In the midst of the early part of the twentieth century, Stevens' popularity came from confronting the fact that reality needed to be contested. During this time, many artists, especially poets, spent their time and energy fulfilling the nihilistic possibilities of life with plausible and credible meaning. Context, in Stevens' case, was only the imagination; there is no other way to interpret reality.

Stevens' poem "The Snow Man" from his *Harmonium* (1923) is one of his most famous poems to deal with the transcendence from to nothingness to meaning:

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
 And have been cold a long time  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
 Of the January sun; and not think  
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
 In the sound of a few leaves,  
 Which is the sound of the land  
 Full of the same wind  
 That is blowing in the same bare place  
 For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is (Stevens 8).

As Robert Pack explains in his essay *Wallace Stevens: An approach to his poetry and thought*, “In the remarkable poem “The Snow Man” Stevens dramatizes the action of the mind as it becomes one with the scene it perceives, and at that instant, the mind having ceased to bring something of itself to the scene, the scene then ceases to exist fully” (45). Looking through the eyes of the snow man, the reader is given the task of perceiving reality. However, if the world is looked upon with objective, unimaginative eyes, there will be nothing to see. “The listener” who has a “mind of winter” will not be able to add to the majestic beauty that is owed to the imagery Stevens provides in the middle two stanzas. In a stylistic sense, Stevens creates the inevitable dichotomy by making the language in the middle two stanzas utterly flavorful and articulate (“junipers shagged with ice,” “spruces rough in the distant glitter”), unlike the other three. Incidentally, the close attention to language is something that Stevens was most praised for during his career, which ultimately symbolizes his meticulous attention to the natural world. Pack goes on to write “. . .at the point when he sees the winter scene reduced to absolute fact, as the object not of the mind, but of the perfect perceptual eye that sees ‘nothing that is not there,’ then the scene, devoid of its imaginative correspondence, has become ‘the nothing that is’” (46). Therefore, the only life worth living is the one generated from the imagination, not the scientific, unemotional mode that most people are forced to adopt. From a man who devoted his professional life to the impartial devices of surety and claims, this hypothesis can seem ironic. If the reader is the snow man, then appreciation for the natural world will spring forth with tremendous ease.



Despite the prevalent and straightforward message concerning the importance of the imagination Stevens presents in the poem, both sides of the duality still reside, even to the point where cold objective reality may actually prevail. Because of the attention paid to both sets of viewing eyes, it can be fair to say that Stevens' message was one that applied just as much to himself as it did to the reader.

In his essay "Imagination as Value" (1942), Stevens calls the poet the "orator of the imagination" and stresses that while "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written, the great poems of earth remains to be written" (Stevens: Collected 730). The poet's responsibility is to portray the world through the use of the imagination so as to look upon reality clearly.

No where does Stevens' better exemplify this than in his work "The Poem That Took The Place of a Mountain" from his anthology *The Rock* published in 1954, a year before his death. According to Murphy, this poem epitomizes Stevens' second poetic phase: "introspective, confronting himself and his unfulfilled desires." Perhaps it is clear to see that Stevens' only love was poetry, which always took the place of everything else:

There it was, word for word,  
 The poem that took the place of a mountain.  
 He breathed its oxygen,  
 Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.  
 It reminded him how he had needed  
 A place to go to in his own direction,  
 How he had recompensed the pines,  
 Shifted the rocks and picked his way among the clouds,  
 For the outlook that would be right,  
 Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:  
 The exact rock where his inexactness  
 Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,  
 Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
 Recognize his unique and solitary home (Stevens 435)

Analytically speaking, Stevens had no real intentions of actually doing away with the physical mountain. The poem mentioned is the necessary ambassador of the imaginative reality, the real perception that people should hold firmly. Therefore, according to Stevens, a man should always substitute the actual objective mountain for the *poetic interpretation* of the same structure. When this occurs, a person can then finally “breathe its oxygen” and “recompense the pines.” If anything, poetry, and the imagination, can be a similar kind of retreat from the real world. It could be as refreshing to the mind and soul as a walk in nature. In doing so, perhaps Stevens truthfully thought that his work might have been the link to the great poems written of earth. Of course, Stevens would be the first to notice the paradoxical significance of doing so, or, as he puts it, to be “complete in an unexplained completion.” Throughout his life, the recurrent theme of duality persists, and he would always stand to be the “exact rock,” even if his surroundings were fallacious. There can be no doubt that Stevens took a massive amount of comfort in his work, to the point where he may have preferred his imaginative world to the one everyone else lived in. However, to hold true to his enigmatic existence, he never entirely gave into this fantastical cosmos.

Within any person’s struggle, the imagination should support individual happiness. It can take a life of ordinary instances and turn them into meaningful detailed images. Stevens became the benefactor of this movement because he had the ability, as a poet, to become an “intermediary between people and the world in which they live and also, between people as between themselves, but not between people and some other world” (Ellmann 730). Much like “The Poem That Took The Place of a Mountain,” his

poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" portrays his role as a poet in the lines, "I am a native of this world / And I think in it as a native thinks" (Everyman 89). Stevens wants to emphasize the ordinary in such a way that it becomes grandiose in nature. This is why there must be an important relationship between a person's practical life and his surreal, impractical imagination.

According to Frank Doggett, "the truth of poetry should be a sense of objective reality and that such a reality could never be known in itself was an ideal that gave his [Stevens'] poems the uncertainty he believed they must have to be objects enduring contemplation" (196). In other words, Stevens' poetry will remain an objective work based on reality because there will never be one clear and concise interpretation by the reader. As Tony Sharpe explains, "Of course each reader brings his or her own peculiar plot to the act of interpretation; but the poem remains, however variably constructed, as primary instigation" (196). Stevens allows the imagination of the individual to determine the confines of reality. As Stevens once stated: ". . .that a man's work should remain indefinite is often intentional." By creating poetry with indefinite interpretations he allows the forces of the imagination to take control of the reader's mind. This allows the imagination to work its way into reality and hide itself within the realm of the natural world. In a letter to a friend concerning his poetry, Stevens once wrote, "my poems seem too simple and natural to me that I am never able to understand how they may seem otherwise to anyone else. They are not intended to be either deep, dark, or mysterious. Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly" (Stevens 937). When Stevens wrote "clearly," he most likely meant that the interpretation of the reader should provide the

clarity, and one should never be clouded with what the author meant; that meaning is entirely irrelevant.

In Wallace Stevens: The Making of a Poem, Doggett writes “that Stevens had two theories of creative imagination, one that it was conscious and purposeful, the other that it was unconscious and involuntary, was typical of his mode of thinking” (16). It is important to understand this about Stevens’ poetry because interpretation will undeniably vary from reader to reader. “Because so much of Stevens’ poetry is a cluster of intimation, one person’s understanding of one of his poems may seem a misunderstanding to another. Intimation points towards abstraction. . .” (42). It can be said that Stevens’ poetry will always be half-developed because it is only half-revealed.

A classic example of varied interpretation can be seen in Stevens’ poem entitled “The Emperor of Ice Cream.” Part of the 1923 Harmonium anthology, the abstract tendencies of this poem play masterfully with the multiple analyses that go with it:

Call the roller of big cigars,  
 The muscular one, and bid him whip  
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
 Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.  
 Let be be finale of seem.  
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.  
 Take from the dresser of deal,  
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
 On which she embroidered fantails once  
 And spread it so as to cover her face.  
 If her horny feet protrude, they come  
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
 Let the lamp affix its beam.  
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. (Stevens 50).

According to Helen Vendler, who analyzes the poem in The Columbia History of American Poetry (1993), “the famous poem, ‘The Emperor of Ice Cream’ resisted explication for some decades,” mostly because of Stevens’ 1933 comments. Stevens, who also said that this poem was his favorite, spoke of its “deliberately commonplace costume,” while also saying that seemed to him to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry. Another Stevens scholar, Milton J. Bates, who wrote Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self, further remarks “that Stevens’ remarks seem contradictory until one remembers that Stevens, in keeping with a fundamental precept of pure poetry, typically inverted the usual hierarchy of subject and style.” In other words, this poem is particularly difficult to analyze because there is more emphasis on the way it’s written rather than the actual content. Nevertheless, in 1993 Vendler attempted to decipher its meaning by converting the poem into a first person narrative. The story would be divided into two separate pieces, the “first being in a kitchen where the ice cream is being made, the other being the bedroom where the corpse awaits decent covering.” According to Vendler, the juxtaposition between the festive kitchen setting and the somber bedroom has to do with the bitter acceptance that life is filled with vulgarity and lust, but is still preferable to death, “cold and dumb.” Therefore, the interpretation deems Stevens to write about a “bitter moment of choosing life over death at a time when life seems particularly lonely, self-serving, lustful and sordid.” If this is the case, Vendler also theorizes that Stevens makes a “momentous choice for reality over appearance” as one must always cope with the harsh realities of what life has to offer.

In almost the opposite manner, Kenneth Lincoln's interpretation from Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry 1890-1999 (2000) looks at this poem with an optimistic attitude. Instead of Stevens admitting defeat in considering cold reality as the victor, the imagination reigns supreme overtaking the vision of the "dead wench." As he writes:

There's a youthful break in the pace, a jump-rope skip completing the Falstaffian form. From bunioned foot to embroidered fantail, earthly base to fanciful end, this elegy resists loss by making art of what seems to be, seeing what is, delightfully. It is an act of the imagination at a wake; the final test, to return to childhood joy in cream made of ice. . . A concupiscent summer is whipped up from winter's absence, the snow man's "nothing" curdled by sweet belief (2).

Whether one likes it or not, there will most likely never be a secure answer in any interpretation of a poem by Wallace Stevens. "One is not surprised to learn that Stevens, when he tried to recall the inception of the poem years later, could remember the "state of mind" which gave rise to it but not the external occasion" (Bates 2). In a sense, it is almost comforting to know that Stevens himself could not remember what the poem is about. If nothing else, his supposed forgetfulness should be a lesson to a reader who would even think about placing a "right" answer to what any of his poem means. "The state of mind" is really the only thing worth knowing about a poem by Wallace Stevens, and that will always be the same; the rest of the delight should be the individual *process* a person takes when reading one.

Trying to understand and capture the language of Wallace Stevens is also a complex task. The essay "Strange Relation: Stevens' Nonsense" by Irvin Ehrenpreis is devoted to trying to translate the words of Stevens from the abstract conglomeration that

he puts together to a simple understanding of the work. In part of the essay, Ehrenpreis focuses on the poem “Depression Before Spring,” originally written as part of his work *Harmonium*. As Ehrenpreis explains, the twelve line poem may seem nonsensical and unruly at first:

The cock crows  
 But no queen rises  
 The hair of my blonde  
 Is Dazzling  
 As the spittle of cows  
 Threading the wind.  
 Ho! Ho!  
 But ki-ki-ri-ki  
 Brings no rou-cou,  
 No rou-cou-cou.  
 But no queen comes  
 In slipper green (Stevens, 50).

However, Ehrenpreis takes this poem and breaks it down into its essential parts:

Here, on the level of common human experience, a man tired of winter looks for a sign of spring. On the level of a theory of the imagination, the poet in a barren season waits for the inspiration that does not come. At the same time in Stevens’ myth of a romance between the mind and reality, an observer makes love to the world, but the world does not respond: it remains untouched by the imagination. In the course of this poem Stevens gives himself several forms. He appears first as a cock crowing and waiting for a hen that never appears. He is also a potential king who cannot claim his throne until an absent queen accepts him. He is at the same time a lover who fails to find his mistress (219).

This interpretation from an abstract poem truly reveals the duality of Stevens and his work. With a firm handle on the imagery of the natural world before him, and the additional ambiance derived from the imagination, Stevens has a tantalizing combination depicting “true” reality.

According to Stevens, this clean and clear reality is a difficult task for the person who wishes to challenge the duality of the human imagination and concrete realism. In 1951, Wallace Stevens was presented with an honorary degree from Bard College. In his address to the audience, he gave some explanation regarding the “real” and unreal.” The clean and clear ultimate reality is the combination of both of these worlds. As he explained, “the real is constantly being engulfed in the unreal. But I want to be quite sure that you recognize that I am talking about something existing, not about something purely poetic. . . The activity of the unreal in reality, that is to say, the activities of people in everyday life, would be like the activity of an hallucination in the mind” (Filreis 45). This means that one cannot exist without the other, and people must learn to assimilate the notions of the real and the unreal in order to maintain balance. If balance is achieved, the “ultimate value will be reality” (Stevens 906).

The attention to imagery and detail within his poetry exemplifies what Stevens thought was truly important when considering the view of the world. And while Stevens did not lead a glamorous lifestyle, he did soak in every meticulous detail that surrounded him. To truly understand what it was like to look at the world through the eyes of Wallace Stevens, one must only look to his intricate journal entries where almost every note is calculated with wonderful methodical descriptions. As an avid hiker, Stevens has countless entries that deal with what he saw, and why it was important enough to be recorded. For example, on December 27, 1898, Stevens wrote a journal entry about a walk he took in Stony Creek, Pennsylvania:



At the top of the hill I sat down on a pile of rocks with my back to the city and my face toward the deep, rough valley in the East. The city was smoky and noisy but the country depths were prodigiously still except for a shout now and then from some children in the woods on the slope of the hill and once the trembling rumble of an unnatural train down the horizon. I forget what I was thinking of- except that I wondered why people took books into the woods to read in the summertime when there is so much else to read there that one could not find in books (Letters 925).

In relation to context and style, this journal entry has more in common with his poetry than one would think. Much like his poetry, Stevens articulately selects his words to properly define his point. And to complement his specific diction is a continuance of run-on sentences, masterfully embodying a stream-of-consciousness that is necessary when an author tries to place the reader into his mind at that precise moment. Symbolically speaking, Stevens' back to the city is rightfully noted as he tells his journal that there is no need to face the "noisy and smoky" urban setting. In other journal entries, Stevens goes out of his way to describe the city, especially New York City, as "fascinating but horribly unreal," and how it was made up of "foolish crowds walking on mirrors" (927). In his life, Stevens did not last long in any cosmopolitan environment. Perhaps that is why he chose to permanently settle down in a small suburban setting, away from the artificial tendencies of a metropolitan backdrop. Like Stevens preaches in his prose and poetry, only the natural world matters. As he eloquently states near the end of the passage, why would any man bring a book into the woods when there's so much to read in nature? (927). It is definitely a safe assumption that Stevens' personal thoughts were utterly consistent with the writings he produced for the public eye.

As Stevens grew older he became more and more cognizant of the "pressures of reality in the twentieth century." He concluded that the problem of pressure may come

from “lack of imaginative control” (Morris 177). When this occurs, there may be two immediate and opposite dangers: “paralysis within the real or escape in illusion.” If these mediums are not consistent, it becomes possible for the mind to be overwhelmed with one aspect, thereby breaking the equilibrium of the real and the imaginative. “Paralysis within the real” can be seen in people who have lost the will to live or continue on with their daily lives. Such people fall out of the “aware” state of mind that Stevens emphasizes. “Escape in illusion” can mean just the opposite. Someone who is unable to perform the everyday tasks of living because they have artificially compromised their will (alcohol, drugs, etc.) may be deemed an escapist. And while Stevens was not personally affected by any of the tragic events of the early twentieth century (The Great Depression, World War I, etc.) he too would deal with the tempting tendencies to escape in illusion. According to Tony Sharpe, those that were acquainted with Stevens in his personal life knew he was an admirer of alcohol and tobacco. In the years he spent in Connecticut with his wife and daughter, it was not unusual to find remnants of a cigar in the corner of his property (Sharpe 9). Perhaps the pressures of reality sought after Stevens so much that he had to remove himself from intimate relationships with people that were supposed to be closest to him.

In a letter to Jose Rodriguez Feo in June of 1945, Stevens wrote about the conditions of reality as a person gets older. To make his point he referred to a quote by Henry James, one of the few author-icons Stevens had admired when growing up. James’ quote was “to live in the world of creation—to get into it and stay into it—to frequent it and haunt it—to think intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations

into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing” (Stevens 949). Stevens goes to explain to Feo that “reality is the great fond” and one should always try to stay in the middle of it. But, in the most humane sense, Stevens also acknowledges that to live in this “reality” all the time is impossible. Each person is sometimes “a little out of it [reality]” and this is an accepted fact of being human.

In the last year of Stevens’ life, all of his letters tend to shy away from poetry and his creative work. As in a letter from July 1955 to Samuel French Morse, Stevens wrote, “There is no chance, I think, of any new poems. Most of the time when I am at home I drowse. I am without energy even to read the numerous things that are sent to me.” (955). However, despite the absence of poetry in his life the will to perceive reality with open eyes was still very apparent: “The most I might be able to do would be to go and sit on the porch and drink lemonade and I should be glad to do that one of these days because I always loved the porch over there.” As with everything he had ever written, his consistent appreciation for the world around him holds true up until the year of his death.

As a man who lived a basic life without suspicion or scandal, Stevens was able to create a unique body of work that spoke to many readers. At the close of Tony Sharpe’s literary biography, he states that “. . .it seems to me that Stevens’s profoundest perception was that all our lives are eerily unimportant, no matter who we are; but that in the matter of who we *think* we are—in the active rather than the presumptive sense—we touch the central of our being. This changes; in it is no protection from pain or death; but it is where the transcendence of desiring interacts with the pragmatics of being” (Sharpe 197). In the “interacting” that Sharpe writes of lies the balance of a human life. As Stevens

would attest to knowing, faith in life can be subjective and fleeting. With so little to grasp as real, a man needs to believe in something, and what can be truer than to place faith in his own perception of the world he lives in?

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