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The Creation of Space for Engaged Reading and Creative Interpretation in the Collected Works of Wallace Stevens

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THE CREATION OF SPACE FOR ENGAGED READING AND CREATIVE
INTERPRETATION IN THE COLLECTED WORKS OF WALLACE STEVENS

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ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens presents a creative space in his poems, opening the role of the reader and inviting active participation. This defies ready interpretation and instead encourages creative reading and interpretive freedom. Wallace Stevens chooses to write from a removed space that allows him to invite the reader in as the original observer. Stevens directly observes and his words, through his stance, create a level of active involvement for the reader. This highlights a focus on nature, nostalgia, removal and his place in between reverie and action. This position builds the body of his poems through much more than simple imagery.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS	6
III. INVITATION FOR INTERPRETATION	20
IV. CONCLUSION	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, Wallace Stevens creates poems from multiple angles and spaces to develop a relationship with the reader. Stevens generates reader experience and maintains a controlled manner throughout the text that encourages liberation on interpretation and reader action. These experiences welcome moments of intense self-reflection that arise from time spent in solitude through reading or instances that occur neither in nature nor in the social world, but instead reign in a moment of perceived “space” somewhere in between both places. Stevens often uses this space to expand and the reader, through observation, creates active interaction. The dual view often acts as an authorial tool used to set up a representation for liberating texts and are in place to challenge the reader. While a fully unbiased narration is not objectively possible, Stevens strives to achieve a semblance of this effect within his poems by encouraging reader participation and active reading. This path is for the reader to follow and to take the liberty of interpretive freedom along the way.

In Steven’s poems, careful presentation of places, items or images can even be fleeting as a quick flashback, or a solitary moment within the text which allows for the

connection and revelation of the larger picture to come into play, piece by piece; the main use of his presentation is to keep the reader in the poem by providing the opportunity to challenge thinking. Stevens connects each instance in the poems through details in the scenery, glimpse of characters and narrative permissions. All the discoveries in the “place” in between reveal so much without focusing on one singular event or image. Stevens encourages interpretive freedom in the space he discusses and creates within the poem breaks. In a provoking manner, Stevens promotes active reader engagement.

An active, fluid read: “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

Perhaps the best example of a poem that can illustrate these complex concepts regarding active reader participation and encouraged engagement from Wallace Stevens is found in his poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”. This iconic, lengthy poem, provides an excellent starting point as the poem defies simple interpretation because it is, in fact, rather hard to explicitly define. The only constant in the poem, remains that of the blackbird.

From *The Collected Works of Wallace Stevens*, “the poem shows that there is no one place that identification with one singular instance can capture the entire experience of the poem: “He rode over Connecticut/In a glass coach/Once, a fear pierced him/In that he mistook/The shadow of his equipage/For blackbirds.” Stevens does not present the blackbird as a pontification point for self-actualization through action, but instead uses small stanzas to illustrate the blackbird in different scenarios. The poem reads like haiku and each of the thirteen stanzas are individual reflections on the idea of the blackbird in the backdrop. The backdrop, provides more opportunity to the reader for interpretation, rather than a narrow focus on, say one blackbird’s day in a meadow or a gilded cage, which adds a level of remoteness to the poem. Stevens is keen on a bird that exists

amongst nature and in daily lives that little attention is paid to. The stanzas, each one, is a call to action for interpretation.

In the poem, a connection may be drawn as each stanza is an opportunity for the reader to review. The breaks in the stanzas each become a new poem after the split and the message from the previous stanza, becomes new. Stevens calls to the reader to observe in this fascinating method as each option, within the same text, is presented. The blackbird in the background, soon becomes the focus of the stanza as each stanza unfolds, forcing the reader to also take a more involved approach at readership as Stevens shows the reader the way through the poem: “When the blackbird flew out of sight/It marked the edge/Of one of many circles”. It is also notable that while “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” calls attention to a member of the natural world that exists within nature the poem is not a nature poem.

The interaction of the blackbird and the reader within nature remain the focus, rather than the setting or images of nature. The line is blurred between nature/art/humanity when the poem denotes: “a man and a woman and a blackbird are one”. Everything is connected in life and in the poem, even when thirteen very different stanzas are used as the tool to convey the image. The use of the thirteen stanzas again provides the reader with more chances to gain closeness to the interaction of the blackbird as Stevens has a closeness to the reader as the poet. There is an air of finality as the stanzas move since another stanza is waiting with a new image and end as each individual thought and scene ends with it: Stevens provides a personalized perception with authorial choice as a tool. Every angle defies a simple explanation and the blackbird, switches course as easily as the poem moves between stanzas.

Discover an Opportunity

Stevens also points out that man is slow to notice the beauty in the whole of the nature, the thirteen stanzas are a way to call the reader to slow and read each one to garner meaning. Ignoring nature, can divide man and nature and here the blackbird is the unifier. Stevens shows the reader that while more enticing or beautiful aspects of nature are more notable, there is a beauty in the constants, for instance blackbird that need more cause for notice. The poem, because of its length, provides thirteen opportunities for review and acute observation is called for in this interesting way. The ambiguity of the stanzas is how Wallace Stevens declares that the reader is to choose a personal observation – the reader’s view of the blackbird as well as the stanza is needed for the reader to take away from and the choice must be made because Stevens has provided the opportunity to do so: “I know noble accents/And lucid, inescapable rhythms/But I know too/That the blackbird is involved/In what I know”. The poem is in motion, through word choices and the stanzas, and set the reader to stop the movement through the reading, as the short stanzas are deliberately presented to do this.

The contemplative narration that Stevens presents within this place generates much discovery on various items, pieces and situations that are often overlooked or ignored, he is not passively writing but rather is welcoming the reader into the poem from the outside. The imagery that is conjured up by Stevens takes the poems to a new dimension by adding depth to the level of complexity. Essentially, Stevens acts as more of an observer to the natural and social world as opposed to presenting himself as an active participant while he is slightly removed in his space. Stevens places the pause as a welcome for engaged reading. The view the reader receives is ready for the dissection of individual interpretation and objectification. The bulk of the meaning in *The Collected*

Poems of Wallace Stevens can be viewed and interpreted efficiently from the observer's point of view that Stevens weaves and sets up outside his poems. In turn, both Stevens and the reader are enabled to be selective toward images and instances without being overly concerned or pressured to seek out a solitary or omnipotent meaning. Interpretive and creative freedom can be seen when Stevens acts as the narrator, then invites the reader to take on the role within the same poem.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Critical Conversation on the Space Wallace Stevens Creates – Robert Pack and the Background of ‘Nothingness’

Many critics have discussed Wallace Stevens’ use of imagination and nostalgia in his poetry and the “space” created by this use and concentration. There has also been constant discussion on the strong relationship to nature and space to which Stevens constantly references. Supporting critical commentary on the reader’s liberation for interpretation further explains that everything leads back to the reader in Stevens’ works. Critic Robert Pack sums up the space Stevens creates concisely by saying: “For Wallace Stevens, the details and specificity of the physical world are often most effectively described against a background of nothingness” (Pack 97). Pack’s piece, “Place and Nothingness in the poetry of Wallace Stevens”, makes that nothingness, that space in which Stevens resides a vital and critical place for the observations and poems to unfold. This is because Stevens is not concentrating on making his points solely for the purpose to achieve grandeur in both the literary world and conventional, easily understandable society, but instead is reaching for the goal of reader engagement. This goal is evident because as an observer, Stevens allows for focus to be placed on the conditions of

understanding/interpretation and importance for the reader on an individual level. The reader of the poem is to take away what they wish from the words that Stevens has provided through an open invitation.

The pace that Stevens exerts is what allows for these observations to become so intriguing, ultimately personal and important. Pack's focus in his article rests heavily on how Stevens uses and expands on the act of existence itself and how this expansion is in turn a critical and important factor to raising awareness on his surroundings. Stevens's simple descriptions of every day, basic items are not basic after all, but rather ready to engage due to the placement within the poems and through the free play of language.

The case for interpretative freedom continues as Stevens makes declarations that move the reader to establish a groundwork for engagement. The most striking example Pack uses which fully encompasses the freedom for reader interpretation that Stevens' poetic positions creates is found in the poem "The Auroras of Autumn". The images of nature, comfort, evil and the ways of the world are all showcased in the poem. The lines of distinction are blurred and the full cycle of how humans, earth, society and the unknown all work together is eloquently exposed. Stevens highlights these familiar instances without picking a side or truly letting on to where he even stands. He is removed. Stevens brings the poem to a close with the lines:

"In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nicks."

Stevens uses strong, evocative wording to describe the senses and even sound. Pack writes of the quick reference to both summer and winter in the last line and all that it represents for the poem, Stevens and the reader's position. This slight split between the

seasons is a tool to show that Stevens writes a liberating poem rather than a restrictive one. The use of splits, both large and small, are a recurring tool that are used throughout the text. In this instance, the reader is forced to decide in the poem as the seasons shift to find the interpretive place. Pack's interpretation focuses on the imagery the active reader must consider:

With summer and winter in his mind at once, and with his poem both naming what he sees in the northern sky and unaming the same images as they change even as his meditation seizes them, Stevens resolves his poem with a deliberate gesture of irresolution. Everything remains open. At this point of the poem, the active reader, in this place of openness and slight disorientation, must choose their own perspectives and are free to do so. (114)

All poems are open for creative and individual interpretation, but Stevens presents more in the idea of closure within the text that the reader must move out of to see when a meaning appears and expectations are altered, yet with Stevens, the experience is created as the relationship with the reader is also established. No clear rules exist for Stevens in the poems, exhibited by his abrupt closures, splits and more to offer different versions of the same poem. Pack concludes his explanation of the poem while furthering an explanation on the goal of Stevens:

The liminal state is clear. It is up to the reader to take what they have gained during this transition. The meditation will have to begin again in another poem, or in another hopeful poet, forever contending with the wind and weather of the world itself to be "enough." The disciplined and triumphant imagination must satisfy desire by willing itself to ask for nothing that is physically impossible.

(114)

The poetry of Wallace Stevens is comprised of open platform offerings that lend the reader the power to tap into the imagination to unpack the poems. The space that Stevens sketches that does not contain declarative statements on meaning, but rather force the reader to step into the poem to gather meaning and interpretation on a personal and active level. If the reader does not participate, there is no meaning to be pulled as the imaginative thought process is critical for the poem to further open in the individual space as Stevens constructs each poem. The varied descriptions, the often-vague transitions and subscenes rouse imagination, active text visiting and act as a whole to draw the reader to the open poetics of Stevens.

Dark Encounters: Sean Keck and “Imagination” in Stevens

The poems are not so much about an object, but rather the reader’s reaction to the object. Stevens’s imagination is and his ability to pull simple objects and simple surroundings into a central focus for the reader is an aptly used tool in his poems. In his article, “Dark Muse: Paramour & Encounter in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens”, author Sean Keck focuses on Stevens’ use of imagination in his work. Stevens works the angle to be one of recognition rather than exclusion. The reader is fully and actively involved as a direct result of Wallace Stevens’ choice to observe his own work from a space slightly outside of his observations.

Stevens keeps the view of the reader in consideration as the plot is imagined, set and then released for engagement and further imaginative exploration. Keck states in relation to this very fact: “The reader, by following this progression outward, becomes the narrator relating his analysis of the poem; this analysis, which discusses the inherent loneliness associated with the imagination, will then come under the scrutiny of a second reader, and so on” (Keck 186). The process for interpretation and personal understanding

is continual, it does not cease. Stevens and the reader both will continue the process as the poems are both written and read.

The experience of the poem is created for the individual reader to view the poems as liberating texts. One of Steven's poems that uses personal imagination as a tool and invites a deeper level of engagement is "Sunday Morning". The poem invokes and involves many emotions and scenes as it moves between home, nature, self, animals and even spiritual connections and themes. The questions that are posed in the text are yet another creative tool that the reader can answer as the poem unfolds, a key to understanding where the reader stands.

The Reader, Engagement and Society

The happenings of society are quietly inserted into Stevens's poems and his writing space and the attention he places on nature does not always downplay or override society and politics. It is the opposite; Stevens writes of convention and society with an ambiguous approach to inclusion and chooses to hold removed stance. He allows the reader to do the same and choose their own level of involvement or understanding as he does. The level of attention that Stevens grants imagination, while including nature and society, shows that while there is always residence in society, there must also be an existence within the unseen and the natural world. This presentation affords more engagement as more opportunities open. Again, this is evident in the splits that are seen in a multitude of the poems that draw the text, action and/or reader into another space. This space is often a balanced place.

A Balanced Perspective- Justin Quinn and the Pressure of Ideology

In author Justin Quinn's book, *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature, and Community*, the case is made by the author that Stevens chooses to encompass and embrace both the physical and unseen.

Quinn writes in respect to this division: "Stevens who refuses this reductive opposition and seeks a visionary balance between city and nature, which is in turn connected with his refusal of those ideologies which would restrict our apprehension of the many selves and sensuous worlds that populate the air" (Quinn 4). Here, it is evident that because Wallace Stevens does not feel as Emerson does about the natural and social worlds being divided, that the space in between both, the spot of reverie, is the best place for Stevens to write from. A state of reverie in nature allows for Stevens to not write poems that are full of politics or opinions. This does not mean that he is lost or fanciful in his dream like space; instead he is free to create and his readers are freely encouraged to participate at will. This happens Steven presents different versions/ways through the poems and the closure appears as expectations in the text change. The experience is what is important for the reader to see.

A Text Guided by Nature, not the Narrator: A Challenged Space

There is a constant and impressive level of attention paid to nature and to the certain details that Stevens is drawn to and expounds upon, but he maintains the position of calm guidance as he directs the conversation without oppressively controlling it. As Quinn expounds on this idea in the context of how poetry must challenge from this space:

Again, this presupposition of a space outside ideology smacks somewhat of universalism. But Stevens is subtler than to try to import a value-system while

pretending to beyond such matters. He is not beyond them, but needs a space to think about them, as do we all. (35)

The presentation of the removal as mentioned before does not create a disengaged view, but instead thrusts little to no imposition on the themes and presentations. Stevens is causing and quietly encouraging the reader to push to comprehend and to interpret. Stevens is the guide which enables this to be possible and successful because the open concept invites the reader to leave their current setting and shed their mindset. The reader's mindset remains open, because Stevens remains open and his words do not demand one version of interpretation. This step allows for the creation of a collective assessment that Stevens sets up through explicit description and emotional, but calm, text through which the reader reaches an involved interpretation, the reader has a choice and an invitation to reawaken to the poem in question. To further this point:

In Stevens, as we shall see, our deepest reserves of emotion and intellect are drawn upon; but instead of forcefully imposing the imagination's constructions on nature, we are called upon to perceive, to use our senses once again and test the old symbolisms, religions mythologies against the contingencies of the weather, of the scene, of the house and hill. (Quinn 67)

Another set of integral points made by Quinn that reflect the expansion of the imagination and the importance of coexisting with both the natural world and social one, further sets Stevens apart from Emerson is striking and can be linked to a more expansive reach on just how important the step back from the action that Stevens portrays is. Stevens sets the tone as a test, a personal quest to engage on a more intimate level. Quinn explains: "Stevens sends us into zones that are uncertain but that are also full of rich possibilities for the imagination" (Quinn 95). Here is it clear to see that it is important to

maintain the connection that both places share. Views are to be challenged and contemplated. Nature is a space, just as society is. In the removed role as the observer, both Stevens and the reader can see each world and draw from it what they wish. The same can be said for the nostalgic and even the religious/iconic here in conjunction with imagination. By being removed and open, Stevens creates his own place for viewing and interpretation.

The Reader Has a Job to Do: Justin Quinn Advocates the Individual

The poems of Wallace Stevens are liberating, not restrictive as these layers, the question, the splits and more, exist for unfolding. Justin Quinn argues critics that miss the importance of the power of the individual that Stevens grants the reader. What the reader creates is important and Stevens continually works to build a relationship with the reader. It is not up to the poem to dictate the reader; it is instead up to the reader to interpret the course and layers of the poem. He can tell what he sees, not what he is involved in. This perspective is presented as an open invitation to the divine, again establishing or furthering connection to the many layers the poem presents. Quinn summarizes this fact nicely in saying that these ideas: “should extend our awareness of Stevens as a poet who is continually concerned with the orientation of the individual and the community within the landscapes and metamorphoses of the natural world” (40). The vantage point, a new scope to observe the scenery from that is created from the fact that Stevens is lingering on the perimeter of both worlds is unobstructed and solely created for many layers that are overlooked become critical facts.

Quinn argues that this is not the case and that Stevens is very much aware of all outside conditions. This treatment of dictation does not make Stevens an escapist, he is merely a spectator. And nothing is lost on the spectator or the active participant. Quinn

writes: “Stevens is still thinking about the role the political plays in our lives even when he is most pastoral. Thus, for me, the poetry of the final phase of his career, (“Transport to Summer”, “The Auroras of Autumn”, and “The Rock”), does not abandon such issues but rather sounds them more deeply” (Quinn 5). The space that Stevens writes from does think about these issues, just not in the sense that is comfortable or recognizable for convention. This condition of solitude provides an evenhanded view on the chaos outside of this realm. Solitude creates a different, liminal experience and thus the case for liberation in the text continues. Justin Quinn makes it no secret that all of the above is achieved by Stevens: “However what remains of importance is Stevens’s figurations of the political imagination, his attempt to envisage communities, their desires, mythologies, politics. This is for me political poetry in the best and deepest sense, one that speaks intimately with its reader without forgoing wider public panoramas” (Quinn 142). Stevens is involved actively in the happenings of his poems; he acts as a primary source and as a leader to allow for the analysis to remain subjective.

The Stevens Residence: Carol Cantrell’s Assessment of Locale in the Works of Wallace Stevens

Carol Cantrell explains in her article, “A Moving Part of Motion: Place as Poesis in Stevens’ Poetry of the Earth”, that the “space” that Stevens writes from is a separate entity. This space is removed from all other forms of activity. It is the space for an observer or a leader, even a critic of sorts. In focusing on this space, Carol Cantrell presents that Stevens was not concerned with the idea of the “where” in his poems, but was instead concerned with placing focus on the “what” within his poems. In conjunction with this idea, Cantrell writes:

Stevens' poetry challenges both humanist and environmentalist conceptions of the human/nature relationship and this double challenge is most dramatic and subtle in his radical revisioning of place. "Place," which humans make in concert with the nonhuman is neither nature nor culture but a particular kind of "between" space belonging in greater or lesser measure to both. (Cantrell 8)

This is a powerful statement by Cantrell that perfectly sums up how convention may not even know this "place" exists or what can be discovered there. This may very well be the motivation for exactly why Stevens chooses to write from it. This "between" state is a vantage point to view both worlds and is critical to the existence of both. This space prevents both from blurring together and does not allow for one to become more important. To Stevens, this is the supreme and liminal place to seek enlightenment and the sublime.

Cantrell, like Quinn, feels that imagination is an important subtext to Stevens' place. She writes about Stevens saying:

His exploration of the activities of the imagination is an exploration of the human activity in the making, of humans building a world, and much of his work offers ways of thinking about humans as makers in an ongoing relation with a more-than-human world. A key word here is "ongoing" for Stevens so consistently treats place as a process, that is poetry is only minimally about "place" as it is usually represented-place as scenic, as enduring landmark or stable background, as nostalgic memory. (Cantrell 9)

With a removed voice, Stevens is free to explore and expand on the human condition through imagination and place. In the instances where the reader becomes the narrator, the leader in the removed space shifts and the engagement shifts to the reader as the poem

moves. Without a singular focus over the single moment of action taking place, a multitude of perspectives can be gained through a continual process of active interpretation. This flow of interpretation is critical. Cantrell shows that Stevens placed more importance on what was not said through experience and instead placed the bulk of meaning and importance on what was thought. Cantrell continues in her article and further expands on the ideas and importance that Stevens presented on nostalgia and imagination. The reader is always important and this is because of how Stevens set up his observation point.

Carol Cantrell does point out how even Stevens' own views on nature and the world shifted over his career: "Within this continuity of feeling for nature, the shift in focus is striking. Stevens' late expression of passion for place both echoes and transforms his youthful cry that humans clumped together in cities have forsaken the earth. The differences between his early and late comments are as significant as the continuity between them, for together they suggest the dimensions of Stevens' radical revisioning of the role of nature in poetry and more generally of the relationship between nature and culture" (Cantrell 8). It is evident from the first part of her statement that Stevens did evolve away from thinking that only those residing in the natural world truly grasped meaning. Cantrell argues that it is evident that Stevens used his time spent in his place between to see that one world is not to be favored over the other. The vantage point between nature and culture and the openness for interpretation that stems from it works not only for readers but was also responsible for a shift of Stevens' own thought process.

Cantrell, like Quim, is of the school of critics that does not interpret Stevens' removal as disinterest to society. Stevens himself made a shift in thought to re-incorporate the social and political back into his world. The removed space simply allows

for all to be noticed. Cantrell explains the magnitude of Stevens' perceptions: "Stevens' poetry provides an entry into a kind of experience and metaexperience mostly marginal within Western culture-that is, direct experience of the mind as participatory in the inhuman more. Stevens' portals open into secular, non-transcendental versions of sacred places-the portal into, which leads to "the nothing" and reframes experience, and the portal out of, which leads into the numerous real and to the acts of human creation associated with it" (Cantrell 14).

Ambiguity and the Free Play of Language

"The Auroras of Autumn," both the suggestion and the application of removed space from the narrator's perspective that is exerted by Stevens is not to be misinterpreted as only suggestive. The discovery this poem presents and exposes in the removed space which Stevens occupies. He is not putting forth an air of arrogance or superiority but instead: "insists on the indifferent grandeur and magnificence of physical reality, the limiting concreteness of place, and the human capacity to "contain" the knowledge of this indifference, to see it as innocence" (Pack 114). The poet and the reader must both be removed from the tangible world that consumes the day and instead focus on what they see when they are looking at everything while thinking of just one image. Through shifting narrators and poem splits, for instance how the speaking voice may not be the one true narrator as seen in how Stevens engages the reader to discover the poem in different ways. These splits act as transitory junctures to push the poem in a new direction. One way, is attention to the form and the other engagement is the reader takeaway. Stevens's words explicate that knowledge is not singular, not to be contained and neither should the artistic freedom of creative interpretation that he affords the reader to be contained.

In the poem “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” the complexity is clear – the poem is a challenge and meant to be just that. Stevens sets the poem up with ambiguity and the descriptions level the complexities into different areas. He has set the words down for dissection and the reader must unfold the satire, the meanings and the usage of language to see the poem through the reveal. Another one of Steven’s poems that through a thorough examination and deep reading that showcases ambiguity through the free play of language is “The Snow Man.” The language Stevens uses does not direct the reader to a direct opinion, but instead changes expectations in a short amount of time. The poem also creates another path with nothing standing in the way of interpretation. Like “Idea of Order at Key West,” this short poem conveys the narrator into the scene as one with the reader. The reader observes the scene, immediately enters the scene and in becoming another narrator/observer to the action, a new perspective is intimately created.

The first line “one must have a mind of winter,” immediately opens the mind of the reader to an expectation of an expected wintery scene. This expectation does place the winter landscape into focus, but does not state what the focus of the winter mind is or should be. It is a tool to set up the poem. A quick check on this line reveals a level of ambiguity for exactly the reason why Stevens is calling attention to winter and all the feelings and imagery that the season conjures up. From the first line, it is not apparent why, as the why remains unseen, just as the snow man does. Again, this poem shows ambiguity because the traditional image of snowman, is not seen in the poem. This omission does not reflect that the snowman wasn’t mentioned, rather which image of the snowman is created as result for the reader. The way that the poem is crafted, shows that the answer could be both. This playful use of language places the reader center stage in

the action. In this poem, Steven offers conjured images in the forefront of the text, but also allows for an indefinite level of imagery to exist at the same time.

CHAPTER III
INVITATION FOR INTERPRETATION

A Winter Mindset: Space in the Snow

“The Snow Man” shows duality and the reader possesses a strong use of creative freedom to not only determine the space split, but also follow the imagery as it unfolds in each piece. One of the spaces is bursting with language and description: “to behold the junipers shagged with ice” and the second half is a split that focuses on the nothing or nothingness that is presented to the reader: “for the listener, who listens in the snow, and, nothing himself, beholds, nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” The similarity to “Idea of Order at Key West” may be noticed in how Stevens jumps in description between sight and sound in “The Snow Man.” For example, “of the pine trees crusted with snow” to filling the scene with “the misery in the sound of the wind” and with this, Stevens wants the mind of the reader to “behold” and to not just allow nature to be. The reader is an active participant. The language used in “The Snow Man,” the actual diction and the lack of conventional poetic movements, reflect a bare/harsh scene that was created by Stevens for the reader to adapt to and not have the scene change for the reader. The reader is to be the poet, the narrator and the snow man which furthers the ambiguity

because the end of the poem swings from living in the frigid scene, to instead a sharp focus on nothingness.

The cold, icy picture that is presented of the winter landscape calls for the reader as the snow man, to notice about those conditions and environment. The picture is the reader's. The next invitation to behold nothingness. The reader does not know exactly what is missing: "the nothing that is not there" is up to the reader. The poetic split after the buildup of the landscape can be played by Stevens who has now placed the question of "nothingness" into the poem.

The very way that Stevens sets up the poem exemplifies how the poem does not direct the reader to a direct opinion, despite a very specific, imagery-rich beginning. The double reading and double role the reader plays, pushes engagement. In "The Snowman", the reader must choose if attention can be placed on natural scene or if there is more to discover as the engagement grows through an active reading. The harsh landscape creates the acknowledgement of a mindset that can identify that environment while not overtaking the poem. The reader is aware, at least at first, distinct locations of space and time, but again in using strong language, Stevens contrasts the visions he is presenting and creating. This contrast moves the poem away from the directive approach at the start and again feeds the ambiguity effectively, in an impressive, short amount of time. Where Stevens says, "spruces rough in the distant glitter of the January sun..." this quick bit of a clash of vision does provide a brilliant juxtaposition of a rough object thrust upon a shiny, glittery image. Again, this use of words splits the poem and can take the reader's view and direction of thought to another space. This is again seen in the description of the pine trees "crusted with snow" which is a rather aggressive manner to state, snow on the branches. Stevens encourages the reader to take in the extreme pairing of the rugged with

the serene, as so much of nature and live embodies. The reader is an observer in the landscape that cannot be described in one fashion or another, ultimately leading to all that can never be explained, but must always be considered, “the nothing that is...”.

Let the Snow Liberate

“The Snow Man” proves to be a liberating text in the way that the text empowers the reader to look at the world around with an interpretive mind, which is called indirectly to pay attention to the beauty and harsh reality of the world. This duality and the attention that Stevens draws to it invites that personal perspective into view. The poem also works as a strong example for active reader participation because Stevens builds up to what he is presenting in the text, a full assessment of imagination as the reader steps into the role of the narrator/observer. The poem is set up to induce another influence onto the landscape/environment of the scene. The authorial choices in “The Snow Man” and the language that Stevens uses, the contrasting metaphors, open play on words and the utilization of ideas of both sight and space create the internal space for the reader to observe. This movement that Stevens creates, works the reader into a position to experience the poem intimately. Without this movement, the poem becomes another landscape poem speaking on the natural cruelty of the season.

Stevens understands nature represents much more than just an attractive scene or a moment spotted on the landscape. The possibilities and transitions are endless for both the observer (Stevens) and the reader. Nature presents an invitation and is the ultimate place in which to open senses and celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, including the reader’s observations. Stevens’s use of imagery creates the earlier discussed act of meditation as an outside motivator as the perception of the reader is called to action through solitude and space. A new space cannot be shared or connected if Stevens cannot

separate as an author and form the creation of the actions of contemplation, observation, silence and the art of solidarity through his words. Stevens uses nature in this poem to create a removed space, outward uses of imagery on the text within to further the connection with the reader and opens the door for active reading.

A Comparative Winter Landscape Presented by Robert Frost

The open forum of reader interpretation that Stevens affords his readers is not granted by his contemporaries in all cases. Robert Frost's wintery landscape in the poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," contains a narrator determined to keep to keep a pace of engagement with his own. Frost marches toward resolution in the poem, whereas in "The Snowman," Stevens keeps the poem open rather than closed for expansion and through unpacking. Frost's poem is easier to interpret because it was designed to be interpreted in a more delegated manner. In Frost's poem, he provides the reader with the understanding that he is to be followed as the voice of the poem and that his vision of the scene, is what the reader sees. The first glance across the landscape belongs to Frost, not the reader: "whose woods these are, I think I know," creates a voice that reflects that the poet is in a familiar place. That place, belongs to Frost, not the reader. From the beginning, Frost continues in saying the "he" or the other person will not see "me" or the voice. The viewing of the scene is personal and the interaction is set up independent from the reader. Compared to Stevens, this poem is closed and the reader is observing Frost's scene rather than interacting with the landscape.

The nature of this poem against "The Snowman" is evident in the fact that Stevens does not insert himself into the poem at all – the landscape is painted and that allows the reader to determine what it looks like, how it feels and who, if anyone, the reader is interacting with. The line "one must have a mind of winter to regard the frost &

the bough of the pine trees crusted with snow”, shows a clear and open presentation of the scene, an invitation for an open read, compared to Frost’s directive lines. Stevens invites the reader to step into the snow to experience the landscape firsthand. Frost in comparison, provides a narrative of his own interaction and thus, the reader is left to observe without engaged participation. The horse in Frost’s poem has a larger interpretative role in the scene than the reader does: “my little horse must think it queer to stop without a house near...” This line keeps the main voice’s own interpretation of the scenario instead of invoking the reader’s thoughts, curiosities and interpretation on the surroundings.

Stevens differs his approach as he never alludes to any specific person or narrator’s feelings in “The Snowman” regarding the presented scenario. Stevens instead opens the poem with the inclusion of “one” and the collective “listener” and that language offers an invitation of ambiguity which in turn draws the reader in. Frost leads to a definitive resolution to the poem and Stevens does not close off engagement in setting one simple or explicit narrative directive.

The Potential Division of Audience – A Further Look at the Invitation to Interpretation

The realm of creative freedom for the reader which Stevens opens is expansive, while at the same time, maintains a strong sense of intimacy. In the position of liminality in which the reader finds themselves reading the poem from, which is in existence due to space created by Stevens, the readers are in control of which direction to take their interpretation. The level of engagement in the poem is flexible: some readers may walk away from a reading with few second thoughts, move on and only take from the words and images that of which they feel they should. These readers do not comprehend the

openness that Stevens creates; they do not use this as a tool. This method of engagement is not incorrect, it merely demonstrates the availability of creative engagement through interpretation. Stevens maximizes the interpretive opportunity the reader is given through the splits he often uses in poems; the reader has varying views to gravitate towards or even overlook.

With this example, the more aware reader may grasp the openness and pull their own intimate ideas into the words of Wallace Stevens. This reader while in the span of transition, remains in the slightly removed space and continues to draw in depth conclusions and inferences which sustain the representations that are presented in the poem. The poem is ultimately theirs for the taking. This occurs because Wallace Stevens writes from an observational point this continuation and addition of ideas is possible and highly encouraged.

Stevens beckons the reader and invites inferences that are to be unfolded by the reader as the poem moves along. An example of this idea that has a dash of playfulness added to it can be found in "Floral Decorations for Bananas." This conversational poem, is in fact about a banana and is a mock to gravity as Stevens gets so worked up over something so small. The banana is important, the reader must determine why. In the poem, bananas achieve a mythical status; items to encourage emotion and to incite conversation, rather than a fruit displayed on a table.

Well, nuncle, this plainly won't do.

These insolent, linear peels

And sullen, hurricane shapes

Won't do with your eglantine.

They require something serpentine.

Blunt yellow in such a room!

These bananas draw quite the reaction and with underlying currents of frustration and even parallels to sexuality, the bananas on the table suddenly offer more power.

Stevens does this for humorous effect and is not trying to write an epic poem. He is having fun with his words and his images. Erotic elements are present in the explanation of the banana as an exotic fruit but, in leaving it up to the reader to take what they wish from his ode, Stevens acts as an observer of this banana. While conventional society may find it odd or uninteresting to write or read about bananas, Stevens does not, and his layers of sarcasm and irony that he piles in the poem proves that he knows society may think this entire poem is frivolous. Stevens allows for the poems to be completely open to interpretation as he stands outside the action and the images through imagination, nostalgia, and observation alone.

By looking at an object that many overlook, the theatric excitement that Stevens adds to this fruit can represent so much more. The observations that he makes from his removed space do focus on the banana, but there is so much taking place around it. The events that happen behind the banana show what is taking place behind the scenes. The bananas are sensual, as are the tropics, and all need to be celebrated:

Pile the bananas on planks. The women will all be shanks.

And bangles and slatted eyes.

Stevens raises the idea of worthiness: are the women worthy of the bananas or are the bananas below the women? Here the idea of fertility is ripe and the banana again takes on an erotic angle. The reader must question the worth of the bananas, the scene and the bananas as the focus. The liminality allows the reader to formulate their own judgment

and opinion on the seriousness of the poem. Simplistic objects carry a starring role and are developed more complexly to carry the poem forward.

Simple Objects and Simple Scenes Create Power

The end of stanza III in the poem “Sunday Morning” is a deep and thought provoking example of how Stevens sets up the process to seek continual understanding. The stark, solitary image is both the reader and the narrator. There is an open emptiness to the invocation of a lone figure and all that one figure can embody, encourages the reader to draw what happens at the table in the poem. This poem is deep and intimate, yet speaks of the greater complexity that is heaven, earth, and an individual’s role in all. The image of the solitary woman at her kitchen table is a striking one, particularly so as Stevens weaves the complexities of the cosmos around her moment of reflection. What is she reflecting on as she sits alone? The questions he asks and the instances he cites do not disturb the scene and for a reader, the poem expands so much further than a simple kitchen table and one woman. Stanza III ends as follows:

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And the next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

These lines encompass the broader implications of the entire poem. Questions of mortality and religion face humanity daily, even if these issues are unconscious or only learned behavior. One must stop and find a connection on one’s own. Here, as Keck suggests, deeper layers of analysis can continue after the poem has been read.

Keck proves that the setup by Stevens is central to the continuation of both the meaning and the presentation of the poems in the manner that Stevens wished. The usage

for Stevens is so that a clear point can be made from a revered state instead of a state caught solely in the action of the social world. Stevens raises a level of awareness that is not always evident: “With this awareness of the solitary nature of imaginative acts, one can apply a modified reading to the mood of the ordering of the world that takes place when the observer and his companion turn “toward the town” after the song” (Keck 182). Stevens lays the foundation and presents the images yet much is left to be inferred and discovered by the reader without dictation from the author himself or inferences that are supposedly embedded in the text.

Discussions on Duality

The poem “The Emperor of Ice Cream” is another poem where Stevens highlights his commitment to the role of the reader. In this poem, the speaker lays down a set of instructions to the reader and the characters in the poem. However, this voice is not limiting the reader by instructions, rather there is a welcoming of interpretation. The speaker beckons and draws the reader in with instructions more as a ringmaster of events vs. a dictator of thought. The speaker’s use of imperative mood creates a relationship to the reader and acts as invitation into the room and into the scene.

Stevens presents his work in this poem much in the same manner he does “The Snowman” in the fact that nothing stands in the reader’s way. Another similarity is the way that the poem opens with ambiguity and then splits into a new direction. The word choices are also an authorial tool to take ordinary words and places the usage in more unusual ways and create a duality that leads to further or sets up the ambiguity. His use of language induces the engagement of the reader and the parody in the poem, is another literary tool that causes an interactive reading.

Duality in the poem can be noticed within the subtle splits; it resides in two different emotions or emotional settings. One setting is a jovial, almost party space, with the second being the funeral scene. Each of these scenes reside in a single space that possesses the finality that is an end, “the only emperor...and death”. This use of language manages to provide death with a lively feel where Stevens has reality and imagination clash. The speaker also embraces the role of the emperor. The speaker also has no qualms about instructing the poem participants on what to do by assigning tasks, “bring flowers in last month’s newspapers”, but there is no direction for the reader. The reader is instead left room to determine if the life of the deceased should be celebrated or mourned, thus creating ambiguity in how the poem should feel. How the reader views the scene, is a personal choice.

The ambiguity between how the funeral can be viewed, shows there is always life and always death in all situations. The focus on the party imagery, is a tool to distract from the concealed body. Many in life wish to ignore death and the “horny feet protrude” is a stark reminder that death is always present. All illusions are broken and the reader steps into the scene as much a participant as the living guests. The poem shows there are many ways to view one scene, action, feeling and even life. Yet another narrative tool is how the narrator calls for attention to be paid to the way that action can be drawn from inactive items. For example, the word choices of “light beam affix” and “let be be the finale of seem” cause the reader to give pause on where those words are directing the view in the room to. The reader has a silent invitation to assign identities to the guests, the dead, the speaker and more. The narrator is ultimately saying to the reader that everything is what you choose to make it.

Perceptions of Imagination and Reality: Powerful Splits in Stevens

The importance in the world on these items, even life and death, are as important as the individual perceives. Taking this thought a step further, Stevens even says “the only emperors are the emperors of ice cream”. This line brings a powerful figure, like an emperor, down to ground level, down to something as mundane and simple as ice cream. Here, the narrator again shows that the mundane can be just as important in life to some as presiding over an empire can be to others. The reiteration of the only emperor being that of ice cream, shows that importance exists only in the eyes of those that lend importance. To the narrator, all the details set forth in the poem may have been important to the departed or the event planner, but to him, they are insignificant. The narrator is callous at times which places a strong juxtaposition in the event of a funeral, usually a place not associated with that emotion. Reality is what we make of it and what is important to some, may not even register with others.

“The Emperor of Ice Cream” splits not only stanzas, but also realities. The rooms mentioned highlight different aspects of life, death, movement and eternal rest. The workers are being instructed with tasks while the observers take the activity in as well as the surroundings. Stevens creates a liberating, albeit a bit confusing text with directed details, but no clear direction for the reader to lean intentionally. In a sense, the reader is asked to watch leaning on the door, to soak up the scene and draw their own deductions, to place their own importance on the scene.

The human is still important to the experience and as Stevens feels with the natural and social worlds both needing each other to exist, the same is to be said for human perspective outside of experience. The reader is also having an experience both inside and outside of the poem as the course shifts and the reader considers the

movements in the poem as a participant and as an observer while reader. Again, when Stevens invites and instructs, the degree of a strange awareness that is created by Stevens connects back to high level. These degrees are outside the normative and instead reside in the liminal. The reader must choose their own version while the engagement is happening.

Space for Intention

Stevens's poems that are grouped into categories often hit a different space of intention. He is always aware of where focus is place and what he wishes the reader to participate with in the space of the poem. With the poems that are centered on Florida, for example, "O Florida Venereal Soil," Stevens reveals a deeper level of exposure. The impression he presents is often true to what convention and society deem accurate about Florida. However, Stevens is filling these impressions with layers upon layers of the underbelly and underlining issues. This poem encompasses the sexual, the religious, and is written in an epic tone. The hidden gems in this poem and the creative interpretation that Stevens grants with a look at instances comprised of both the natural and social worlds are truly striking:

"When you might sit/A scholar of darkness/Sequestered over the sea,"

These lines place the reader neither on the sea or looking at it. Instead, the reader is alone, sequestered, over it from a perfect point of observation. Here, the natural images are mixed with deep political references to the "new world" and the two coexist for Stevens to reflect his respect for the images he writes about and for Florida itself. The call for the reader to observe the surroundings that are detailed in the poem can be used as an authorial tool for the reader to garner interpretive freedom.

Authenticity and the Every Day Notion of Every Day

The poem “Idea of Order at Key West” perfectly fits for further discussion as the relationship between imaginations, reality and how they are affected by art remain ambiguous. The action in the poem remains open for interpretation as the narrator’s perception of the scene and the world shifts, so does the reader’s. By blending the image of a woman with the powerful and majestic sea, Stevens asserts that the sea is the inspiration for the “she”, while the setting, the sun and the beach, set up the path for the reader to pass through. The poem progresses and Stevens creates an intimacy on this open path as a collaborator for the reader to work with. “Idea of Order at Key West” asserts that art has the power to greatly alter the way that reality is viewed and how interactions in the world take place. Stevens tells the reader that the woman “was the single artificer of the world in which she sang” which makes the reader feel the connection to the ocean and the singer. She is all encompassing as is the ocean, as is creation and the ultimate maker. Everything is full circle as the world, like the sea and the woman’s voice, connects and flows. The art of the song inspires the setting, the men and the reality for the reader to view everything differently and openly. The creative act of interpretation is opened.

The poem focuses attention on the woman/the song/the ocean but the narrator, in fact both men, also then become participants in how imagination and reality interact. The reader is also involved in the action through individual interpretation. The woman creates a new world view through her song for all and the stark impression of nature, forces the art of the new experience and the relationship of seduction, for both the narrator and the reader. “It may be that in all her phrases stirred/ The grinding water and the gasping wind/But it was she and not the sea we heard”.

Here, the singer is detached from the listeners and Stevens might make an obvious wish for the role of the reader to also be seduced by the woman in the poem and be also changed by her song as the reader is welcomed into the scene. It doesn't belong to only Stevens. The interpretative freedom arises in how the reader chooses to fall into the relationship with the woman, the setting and the work. The experience is as fluid as the sea. How the reader experiences the setting during and after reading, establishes their own connection with art and reality. The reader is engaged as an observer, a companion witness to the two men on the shore, standing right there with the two, hearing the woman sing and taking away from the song and the sea, a deeply personal message and view.

The view and experience of the reader continues to be a focus for Stevens and another poem that sets the stage for active reader engagement and creative reading is Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar". The space that the poem creates room for interpretive freedom and calls for the reader to do what they wish with the imagery in the text. This poem highlights the contrast between nature and what is man-made. The first stanza reads:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The mere act of the placement of the jar shows that the location and the contrast is meant to encourage conversation. The narrator is placing the jar and ultimately waiting for the dialogue to transpire. A unique experience is thus created by a simple jar. The reader is then given the reigns to view the jar in an imaginative, even dramatic new light

considering that the man-made, simple object is suddenly focused and powerful.

Wilderness in this stanza, is amplified in the natural state by the jar sitting quietly within the unruly scene. There is a quiet patience reflected in this placement, a pause given to the reader to consider the surroundings.

“Anecdote of the Jar” essentially enables the jar to become more prominent as the poem continues. The amplification almost works backwards from the careful placement of the jar, to the increased awareness of the surroundings as the reader also becomes more involved with the short poem. This is interesting because the reader engagement creates the increased importance of the seemingly insignificant object, to seem larger than the natural surroundings that it is placed in. The jar becomes part of the landscape or even a prominent fixture within the natural scene in which it doesn’t belong. Stevens invites the reader in to think about their own surroundings and if they can draw any correlation to the jar and themselves. The landscape the jar sits in provides the additional angle to outline interpretation. The jar is not restrictive, but is rather open and the commitment that Stevens shows the reader is again seen. Does this experience create a more intensified jar/person or rather just another dot on the landscape? The reader can choose.

In this poem, the reader’s role does differ compared to the role that is created and granted within “Idea of Order at Key West,” but the reader remains engaged through the form that reflects how the reader is welcomed to interact. There is no call to listen to the song of a woman by the sea that so moves one to reconsider ideologies, but rather the patient, quiet placement and awareness of space that Stevens creates. His descriptions of the scene keep the poem open, which means that the reader must give pause while reading. The jar remains blank; there is no effort to make the jar anything more than simply a jar, it is instead a landmark. The jar marks the space around in the wilderness

and the jar provides no declaration on how the connection should be made. The reader is pushed to see that adaptability is important, both for the jar and the observer, as the reader is pushed to see that the natural space is altered by the jar.

The reader experience in both “Idea of Order at Key West” and “Anecdote of the Jar” is created through active reading in which the reader is welcomed to take part in and become part of the scene. There is a welcoming into the natural environment in each poem and the reader is asked to step through. Relationships are created for the reader in each poem, real or imagined, and these complexities ultimately connect the reader to the space of the poem because expectations are altered as the poems continue. The ambiguous nature of these poems, both set in the space of the natural world, defy ready interpretation and provide a slow pace for the reader to gather time to build their interpretation. Much is said by Stevens within “Anecdote of the Jar”, even though the poem is short, active reading can transpire.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Engaged Readership: The Ultimate Human Element

There is an invitation from Wallace Stevens in these poems and that invitation speaks to the impact that the human element has on the natural world, the human element can be transferred through the introduction of the exclusive reader. All interactions are significant and every dynamic is meaningful for the poet, reader and natural setting. The reader can find residence in their own private space to consider just how these factions all play off one another and how reality, imagination and self must coexist along with the natural world and society. The pictures that the poems generate are evolving along with the reader, where can these experiences be found and where do these moments exist? The reader is able because of the space Wallace Stevens creates, to take these images with them into real life.

The poetry of Wallace Stevens is not to be read passively; he did not structure his poems in that manner. Instead, Stevens himself has set it up so the reader will find take a moment and attempt to read through the splits, the action and the ambiguity to find the way the poem is constructed. The reader must participate to gain the experience. The

almost complete control that Stevens hands to the reader must be utilized. It is a quiet control, yet calculated, but not in a menacing fashion. If the reader can read and observe the poem from the same space in between the worlds, images and ideas can be created by the reader and the reader can choose what they wish to be immersed in; the ultimate act of reader engagement. The reader can envelope, evolve and spend as much or as little time as they wish on every detail within the text. The contemplative, reflective state that Wallace Stevens creates by stepping between worlds, does not dictate, but instead guides thought processes into spaces that most often are not inhabited by human thought.

Wallace Stevens through his work and this removal, serve as a reminder that taking a step into the space of reverie or the space of the unknown, between worlds, is a critical part of our existence, not only in the world of poetry. This level of perception should transcend into daily life so every instance of beauty, peace and even conversation can be enjoyed and appreciated with a fresh, open look.

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