

Projections Of Reality In Wallace Stevens Poems

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ABSTRACT

We must not accept the established notions and projections of reality. The traditional view of this world, in which we live, is that it is a beautiful world. A believer in this traditional view gives his own reasons to explain why this world is beautiful. Actually, however, his explanations may not be true or authentic. Our imagination may not accept the explanations of this world given by the intellect. The imagination is more reliable in our understanding of the reality than our intellect is. And every man, therefore, has his own imaginative understanding of reality.

PROJECTIONS OF REALITY IN WALLACE STEVANS POETRIES

Throughout his poetic career, Stevens was engaged in a mental debate about the relative claims of imagination and reality. He himself spoke of his “reality-imagination complex,” meaning thereby that he was obsessed by the theme of the relative claims of imagination and reality. This complex is the key to the entire bulk of Stevens’ poetry. Whenever he speaks about the nature of the poetry and whenever he theorizes about poetry, he raises this question. He regarded imagination as a higher faculty than the intellect, as most poets do. But most poets do not keep harping upon the manner in which the imagination apprehends or interprets reality. Most poets give free reins to their imagination, and then proceed to write their poems. But Stevens was constantly haunted by what he regarded as a

conflict between reality and imagination. In this poem he first asks a question. The question is why there is so much pain and suffering in the world.

The orthodox or traditional answer to this question is that this world is beautiful, and proceeds to justify his view. In his opinion this planet is rosy, ripe, and right. But this is not a satisfactory explanation of this world. We must not go by appearances. The reality, as seen by the imagination, is quite different. The intellect looks at reality in a different way from the way in which the imagination looks at it. An imaginative apprehension or understanding of reality is more reliable than an intellectual apprehension of it. We should not stand helplessly at the edge of reality but should try to move to the middle of it because, only by standing at the middle or centre of reality, can we really enjoy this world.

The imagination can give us such insights into reality as to make life worth living. A poet too should make use of his imagination rather than his intellect to describe the reality of this world in his poems. Only then can a poet write the ultimate poem. The colours red and blue, which find a mention in this poem, have a special significance in Stevens' poetry. He used the colour red to symbolize reality, and the colour blue to symbolize the imagination. Thus, when he gives to one of his poems the title *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, the word "blue" in it symbolizes the imagination. The poem before us, like the bulk of Stevens' poetry, is difficult to understand. Indeed we may go through this poem again and again but we would not follow the reasoning or the argument in the poem. Of course, we would be able to judge that there is an argument in the poem, or some kind of discussion of some subject pertaining to this world in which we live. But what the poem really means can be deciphered only by scholarly critics on whose guidance, then, we have to depend for our understanding of the poem. One thing, however, we do understand easily so far as the meaning of this poem is concerned.

Stevens is obviously ridiculing the lecturer who glibly speaks about the beauty which he finds in this world and which he tries to describe to his listeners. Stevens does not find this world beautiful in the same way in which this lecturer finds it. The world is beautiful for Stevens also; but it is beautiful in a different way; it is beautiful only when we stand at the middle of the reality as apprehended by our imagination. This poem is written in stanzas of three lines each, without any rhyme. Stevens had a strong preference for this kind of stanza, and wrote a large number of poems according to this pattern of composition.

The theme of the poem *The Old Lutheran Bells at Home* is “pertaining to Luther.” The reference here is to Martin Luther who revolted against Roman Catholicism and against the authority of the Pope having his headquarters in Rome. Martin Luther was the founder of what is known as Protestantism, so called because it came into existence as a protest against the Roman Catholic faith. “Home” in the title refers to the State of Pennsylvania within which Stevens was born in the town of Reading. Recalling the church bells which he used to hear in his home town, he says in the poem that the ringing of those bells symbolizes the voice of the priests and the clergymen calling people to the church. The pastors or the clergymen call the people to the churches in the names of saints and other holy men because it is always by citing the authority of the founders of religions and other religious leaders that the clergymen can command the obedience and the allegiance of the people. The authority of men like St. Paul, Jerome, Francis, and Martin Luther is generally cited in this connection if people are to be convinced of the need to attend prayers and sermons in a church and to sing hymns.

Actually, Stevens is here mocking at the way clergymen and priests try to acquire a hold on the minds of the people. The sextons ring the bells as a routine which must be observed in case people are to be summoned to a church. (A sexton is a church official who

performs various duties including the ringing of the church bell). The church bells have been ringing for the past many centuries; and, during these past centuries, clergymen and priests have been regularly addressing the congregations in the churches in order to teach them certain religious beliefs which do not have any real basis or which have now become obsolete. The clergymen are the shepherds who look after the people's spiritual welfare just as shepherds look after the welfare of their sheep. (A priest is generally referred to as a shepherd, while the people under his charge are known as his sheep. This metaphorical use of "shepherd" and "sheep" is very common). Stevens did not believe in the orthodox Christian creed. In this poem he makes fun of the sextons calling people to the churches just as he pokes fun at people hoping to go to paradise in his poem *Sunday Morning*. Like *Sunday Morning*, this poem shows Stevens' religious skepticism and also his capacity for satirical writing. He was an opponent of the rituals which are carried on in the churches and the kind of religious teaching which goes on in the name of the great religious leaders some of whom have been named in this poem.

Stevens' attitude of irreverence in such poems is noteworthy. He makes no secret of his opposition to orthodox and traditional Christianity. Of course, it requires a lot of courage to oppose religious orthodoxy openly; but in the twentieth century people do speak openly against religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism. Thus, Stevens takes an enlightened and progressive view of religion, and refuses to bow to the dictates of the orthodox theologians and clergymen.

In this poem *The Closing Line* Stevens had originally written the closing line thus: "As they teeter and totter in the belfry walls." The wobbling motion was obviously foremost in his conception. But "they" in the closing line is ambiguous. It may refer to the sextons, or it may refer to the bells. The use of the word "jangle" in this line is more appropriate to the

bells. Thus we are left to decide for ourselves whether by “they” Stevens meant the sextons or the bells. This kind of ambiguity is frequent in Stevens’ poetry, and it is often deliberate on his part. In any case, the tone of mockery is perfectly clear in the closing line.

The concept of the poem *Vacancy In The Park* symbolically represents a vacancy in the mind of the author of the poem. What Stevens here wants to say is that his mind is blank at this particular moment. In other words, Stevens has run short of ideas for the writing of poems. The poem is extremely short and is extremely effective in conveying to us the blankness of the human mind at a particular time. What Stevens really wants to say in this poem is that his mind has become blank, and that he has run short of ideas for the writing of poetry. This idea has been conveyed to us metaphorically or symbolically. The word “park” is nowhere mentioned in the poem; this word occurs only in the title. The park symbolizes the poet’s mind. A number of analogies or similes have been used in the poem to reinforce or to clarify the idea. Stevens could have expressed the idea in a direct manner also. But poets often speak through symbols or by making use of figures of speech like similes or metaphors. The opening line presents to our minds a concrete image: it is the month of March and someone has walked across the snow on the grass growing in a park. This someone is looking for something, though he does not know what he is looking for. The meaning of this image is that Stevens finds himself searching his mind for some new ideas which he can express in his poetry.

Thus, Stevens has created a poem out of the very blankness in his mind. Then follow three similes, each of which is not only concrete but highly suggestive. Each simile here is in itself interesting by virtue of its simplicity and its concreteness. Each simile, furthermore, has the merit of being perfectly realistic. We can certainly visualize a boat which has sailed away from the shore at night and disappeared. We can visualize a guitar or any other musical

instrument left on a table by a woman who had forgotten to pick it up while leaving. Then we can also, to some extent, capture the feeling of a man who has come back to see a certain house from which he had departed.

As already pointed out, each of the similes is highly suggestive, so that we are free to imagine what we like in each case. Everyone can imagine for himself the reasons for the sailing away of a boat at night, and everyone can invent for himself the circumstances in which the boat left as also its destination and its passengers. Similarly everyone can imagine for himself who the woman guitarist was, why she came to this particular place, and under what circumstances she went away, leaving a guitar on the table. And, finally, everyone can imagine why the man mentioned in the poem has left a certain house and why he has come back to see it. In the two closing lines we are given another image: the winds from all the four directions—north, south, east, and west—blow through the arbour in the countryside where vines growing in abundance seem to have formed mattresses. A kind of melancholy broods over this poem. The mood is one of wistfulness and desire.

The poet is looking for he knows not what this is another remarkable poem by Stevens, remarkable because of its extreme simplicity which is something unusual in Stevens' poetry. The language of the poem is the simplest that one can imagine; and the ideas too are perfectly simple. And yet, before we go through this poem, or even after going through it, we need to be told by some scholarly critic that the vacancy in the park here refers to the blankness which Stevens experienced in his mind. Once we are told this fact, we would really enjoy the poem, especially its similes. Here we have an example of Stevens' habit of piling analogies whenever he gets an opportunity. The poem is written in two-line stanzas without any rhyme. Stevens wrote many poems in two-lines and three-line stanzas, most often using no rhyme.

In his poem *Dance of the Macabre Mice* Stevens has depicted the Statues (and other monuments) cannot perpetually keep alive the memory of a man, no matter how heroic his deeds might have been. A man may have liberated his country from slavery, or a man might have founded a State, he would yet ultimately become a victim of time and fate. The statue of such a man, intended to bestow immortality upon him, would yet become the hunting-ground for the hungry mice which would run to and fro upon it in search of food. ("A macabre dance" means a dance of death. Here the word "macabre" has been transferred to the mice; but the idea remains the same. The mice running to and fro all over a statue has no sanctity are dancing a dance of death in the sense that the great hero's statue has no sanctity for the mice). This poem reminds us of Shelley's famous sonnet entitled *Ozymandias* which expresses much the same idea.

This poem is a description of the statue of a great patriot and war-hero on horseback. (Stevens had in mind the statue of Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Park opposite to the White house in Washington D.C. Andrew Jackson was the seventh President of the United States of America). Behind this statue is the history of a nation. The history behind this statue is "beautiful" because it is a record of the glorious deeds of men like the one who is here shown as riding a horse. The beholder would experience a feeling of pleasant surprise on seeing this statue and reading the inscription at the base of the statue. The inscription describes the man on horseback, with a sword in his hand, as "The Founder of the State". After reading the first three and a half lines, we experience another surprise when we go through the words which follow: "The horse is covered with mice." The mice are running about on the horse on which the hero sits astride.

The mice seem to be dancing a hungry dance. In other words, the mice are hungry, and they are running to and fro on the statue in search of food. Of course, they would get no

food on the statue but, being hungry, they are trying to look for food everywhere including the length and breadth of the statue. The language of the inscription at the base of this statue is “lordly” and resembles the loud sounds of tambourines and zithers. (The zither is a kind of musical instrument, like the tambourine). The poet then asks whether any man has ever founded a State which remained totally free from mice. The idea is that, no matter how glorious the deeds of freedom-fighters and patriots may be, the memory of the work done by them suffers eclipse in course of time. The memory of such great heroes is, in course of time, dimmed and undermined by the ravages of time. The last two lines contain a striking image though we must perceive the irony behind it. These lines bring before us a bronze statue of a hero with his arm holding a sword and outstretched, as if determined to crush all evil in this world.

We have here an excellent poem which presents no difficulties to our understanding. The idea in it is one which we can appreciate as being true. It is a compact and close-knit poem written in a style which is marked by the maximum possible economy of words. The style of this poem is terse and aphoristic as distinguished from the gaudy and dandiacal style of the early poetry of Stevens. The pictorial quality of the poem is also noteworthy. The pictures have an “imagist” quality. The message of the poem is perfectly clear: the great hero shown in the statue is dead, but the mice are alive and re energetically dancing or running about on the statue.

The Statue as a Symbol

The statue in this poem symbolizes absolute truth. The statue is a work of art symbolizing the petrification of a myth which was viable once. The statue is treated indecorously by the unappeasable mice. The mice are called “macabre” because the imperious state is not really a

statue at all but a skeleton. The statue is, to use a line from another poem by Stevens, one of “the metal heroes that time granulates.” As such, the statue is delicious food for the mice in the poem. The man whose statue it is appears absurd and his heroic manner:

It is not suppose that Stevens would not respond to the glorification of man as embodied in the sublimity of the statue. But Stevens wishes to say that the statue, representing this glorification, must be one with the time. The particular statue which Stevens has in mind certainly does not satisfy him because this statue violates the air.

But fixed and vulgar as the dance of the mice is, the statue is even more fixed and vulgar. This statue resembles the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson, which was Stevens’ chief example of the American vulgar sublime. Although the multitudes of people have been reduced to mice in this poem, they are less absurd than the product of the public fancy which they are degrading and disgracing. Stevens is here definitely on the side of revolution, primarily a revolution in the imagination. But the revolution has also a political dimension

In many of his poems *Men Made Out of Words* occupied an unique place Stevens illustrates the power of imagination to continue to transform reality and give it new shapes according to changes in the circumstances or in the mood in which a poet looks at things. There is no such thing as permanence in this world. A principle of change and flux is constantly in operation, so that we are faced with the spectacle of an ever-changing reality. “Transformation” is therefore at the bottom of many of Stevens’ poems. In *Men Made Out of Words*, Stevens says: Life consists of propositions about life.

Now, this statement constitutes the fundamental hypothesis which guides Stevens toward the act of transformation. Having begun a poem with a hypothesis of this kind, Stevens proceeds to elaborate it by metaphor. This method reminds us of the method

followed by John Donne who, beginning a poem with a metaphor, used to elaborate it by logic. Many of Stevens' poems are little more than hypotheses, or possible ways of seeing the resemblance between objects—not objects which the poet finds in nature but those the existence of which he assumes from conjecture. Each poem offers hypothetical transformations, each serving to demonstrate the possibility of resemblance between seemingly dissimilar.

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Intricacies Of Family Relationships And The Isolation Of The Individual In Sinclair

Lewis's *Dodsworth*

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Sinclair Lewis is one of the major figures who emerged in American fiction, after the Second World War. He is widely acclaimed as one of the most accomplished stylists and prolific writers of his generation showing remarkable versatility and range.

Lewis's novels are concerned with the intricacies of family relationships and the isolation of the individual within the family set. In his novels, he discusses the importance of family relationship, and for Lewis, families clearly provide not only his major sources for

learning about the world as a child, but also a fertile ground for studying how people adapt themselves and endure the pain of loss and disappointment of life, and how they adjust living with this, and yet continue to live and love. All the major conflicts and central themes of his novels evolve from this concern for the family, the individual isolation, and relationship to the community. Also, Lewis's early isolation and struggle for identity provide both style and material for his fiction.

During the thirties, retrospective remarks by important critics tended to be kind. Lewis Mumford reappraised Lewis' work and announced in an article entitled "The America of Sinclair Lewis that in *Dodsworth* the author "achieved... the top of his excellence as a novelist," More to the point of this chapter are remarks made Later in the decade by Joseph Wood Krutch and Granville Hicks. Krutch declared that Lewis had reversed himself on "common Americans," but that *Dodsworth* was an example of balance, and his best novel. Hicks' analysis states that before *Dodsworth*, Lewis had assumed" that the good life and financial success (were) virtually incompatible" but that he changed his mind because he had proved by his own career that success can be deserved. In *Dodsworth*, concludes Hicks, he insisted that the enemies of Babbitt were not always good.

As Krutch suggests, *Dodsworth* is an example of balance, and in it Lewis insists, as Hicks points out, that the opponents of middle class American culture are not always right. Mark Schorer in further off the target, however, when he states that Lewis "turned back to reassertion of...middle-class, mid brow and Middle Western values...." This turning back is only partially true of the novel *Dodsworth* and even less true of the character *Dodsworth*. For what-ever else it does, *Dodsworth's* European experience gives him a new position from

which to view his culture. Sheldon Gerstein is quite right in saying that "Dodsworth returns to America with a new objectivity.

For a time they wander around Europe where in Venice they larger meet Edith Cartwright, the American widow of an English diplomat, and trip their placid charm is in contrast to Fran's brittle politeness. Sam and Fran soon move on to Berlin to begin once again the round of Social activity. This time Fran is coquettish with the charming and boyish in the last remnant of an ancient house now employed as nice as a bank clerk. Kurt is very friendly, guides the Dodsworth on tours of Berlin and its environs, and energetically charms Fran. When a cable arrives announcing the birth of their grandson, Fran is horrified and refuses to let Sam tell anyone (by which she means Kurt). And she refuses to go with him to Paris to meet some old friends from Zenith. On his return to Berlin, Sam discovers Kurt and Fran in a compromising situation. She angrily denounces Sam and asks for a divorce so that she can marry Kurt,

A glance at the plot summary may make it seem that in *Dodsworth* Lewis ignores social issues entirely in order to concentrate on the breakup of a marriage. This is not the case, for Samuel Dodsworth's gradually increasing awareness of the true nature of his wife parallels his growing detachment from his culture. A second apparent difficulty to a consideration of Lewis' view of American culture is that most of the action takes place outside the United States. But the situation is somewhat similar to that in *Arrowmith*, which was concerned with medical science and which had many chapters set abroad, and yet was hailed as an "American" novel. *Dodsworth* is he about a disintegrating marriage, with most of the action set abroad one and yet, as Lewis Mumford noted, it reveals much about the America with of Sinclair Lewis,

The coverage of American cultural institutions in this novel comes about in two ways. First, Samuel Dodsworth, as he becomes an, more and more exposed to foreign behavior patterns, begins to compare European and American norms, and to ponder on the meaning of discover their differences. Secondly, he engages in extended conversations with foreign nationals which are full of give-and-take comparisons the two cultures. This comparative coverage sheds light on both cultures and in a vivid, albeit indirect literary device for the exploration of a culture, It is not a new technique, but *Dodsworth* is Lewis best contribution to the "international" novel, that sub-genre of the comedy of Sinclair whose most notable American practitioners have been James Fenimore Cooper, William Dean Howells, and Henry James. *Dodsworth* is unique in that more of it is devoted to an exposition of American customs, habits, and Sinclair than would be true the problems really inter-cultural. As it is, most of the tension and opposition occurs among Americans, with Europe being more of a catalyst than an ingredient of the action.

The major American characters in this novel are not blinded only by greed as they have been in many other Lewis novels, Samuel *Dodsworth* has made a great deal of money without having been corrupted by it.. He had no longer the dignity of a craftsman. He made nothing; he meant nothing; he was no longer Samuel Dodsworth, but merely crowd vigorously pushing one another toward nowhere "Although Sam can no longer control the machine, he can withdraw from though its operation. Withdrawal is to him only the lesser of two evils, for and whether he stays or leaves he has lost his sense of workmanship: the only distinction is that by withdrawing he has lessened his responsibility to the system and has taken the necessary first step toward his final autonomy.

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