

The Use of the Metaphysical Conceit in Wallace Stevens's Poetry

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Metaphysical conceit means a far-fetched comparison between two **totally** different or dissimilar objects or situations to create aspects of similarity between the dissimilar ones. This meaning device is used widely by the Metaphysicals, a school of poets during the seventeenth century. Wallace Stevens's poems show his deep influence by this school in using conceits similar to the metaphysical one but with some invention and innovation according to his own age, temper and subject matter. His poetry is characterized by the seriousness implied by the use of elegant and light expressions⁽¹⁾. Hence, Stevens's wit lies in his ability to conjoin two thoughts by force and by using free verse through compact poems.

The Metaphysical conceit in Wallace Stevens's poetry assumes additional function and acts as the pivot of the poem. Thematically,

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Stevens's verse is a good example of secular and sacred poetry which shows a great interest in what may be called the 'symbolic conceits' for the unexpected and the quaintness of their comparisons. Wallace Stevens's conceit is the most metaphysical of all American poets. Since his scholarship, eccentric conjunctions, irregularities and latent violence have suggested to many readers a similarity with the poetry of John Donne⁽²⁾.

The difficulty of approaching Stevens's poems turns many students away. Yet, Stevens is one of the most apt voices to speak about different themes such as the perfection of poem, the supreme fiction in the writers and the readers' lives, the value of poetry and all art, the accessibility of great moral, the impenetrability of most of human relationships, the evanescence of formalized belief systems including religion, the frustration of imperfection and others. His verse reveals that he is obsessed with endless binarisms; the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the ordinary and the extraordinary where Stevens's wit lies since he has a unique control over the contradictions⁽³⁾.

Concerning Metaphysical poetry, the Metaphysical poet tries his best to concretize the abstract. For instance, George Herbert in his well-known poem "The Pulley" in which the pulley is used to stand for the Creation Story, that is man-God relationship. Herbert visualizes the abstraction, unlike Stevens, who invents this

metaphysical process by the abstraction of the real. Stevens says that the poet must be able to abstract reality "which he does by placing it in his imagination, by giving it the substance or meaning of a fiction"⁽⁴⁾. As he builds, for example, a bridge between art and life, fact and miracle, the world of reality and the world of imagination. His whole concern is to combine these two opposites to make interaction between them. As marked by William York Tindall that "analogy and interaction remain the principles of Stevens's poems"⁽⁵⁾. Stevens wrote 'poems of reality' which illustrate the use of comparisons as he wrote "Reality is an Activity of the Most August (creative) Imagination"⁽⁶⁾. He makes the images the body of his thought.

According to his writings, his work questions the relation between "imagination" and "reality". He wrote **Harmonium** in 1923 and dedicated it to his wife. This collection contains some of his best known and most often anthologized poems such as "Sunday Morning", "The Emperor of Ice-Cream", "The Now Man", "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock", "Peter Quince at the Clavier"¹ and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"⁽⁷⁾. **Harmonium** remains a study of contrasts, since Stevens composes his analogies and metaphors from the particulars of reality. Marianne Moore made a review of **Harmonium** and gave Stevens an esteem as a craftsman rather than as a sensibility⁽⁸⁾.

Symbolic conceit means things that represent or stand for more than themselves which are combined by force together and here Stevens's conceits represent the metaphysical words that may bring an image to mind which then becomes the symbol of the poem, that is the abstractionism is materialized in the course of extended comparison. Hi Simons in his essay "The Genre of Wallace Stevens" defines the conceit as "A figure in which two terms of a comparison meet on a limited ground but are otherwise incongruous" saying that Stevens's compositions are conceits quite of the Metaphysical order and Stevens is one of the originators of the Metaphysical trend in the poetry of our time⁽⁹⁾.

Like most of the modern American poets, Stevens's poetry was nourished by French Symbolism. He read voraciously and tried his hand on French symbolism, the aesthetic dandysim of the English, and imitations of oriental forms⁽¹⁰⁾ Stevens sought for some representative symbols presented in the form of strange objects which inhabit the poems and result in many valuable comparisons. His comparisons show his deep interest in the renewing power and reinventing the figures that had allowed those of the past to live. And this is Stevens's theory in that it asserts the necessity of always beginning anew⁽¹¹⁾.

Stevens's poems are of three kinds: one deals with religious matters in secular way, second deals with social affairs and third

discusses historical events. Throughout the three kinds Stevens deals with imagination and fact or subject, object and the nature of reality as a way to an end. This paper explores how Metaphysical conceit in three different Stevens's poems can help elucidate certain practices within the realm of his modernity. For the religious theme "Sunday Morning" is a suitable example, for the social matter "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is selected, and for the historical evolution, "Dance of the Macabre Mice" is a typical one.

"**Sunday Morning**", for example, is virtually a 19th century poem in its eloquence and concern for the loss of religious faith. The poet shares a meditating woman's nostalgia for belief. She muses on life and death, religion and the beauty of the world. The poet tries to facilitate her acceptance of the natural world by describing that world in the most attractive terms, saying that it is a place of deer, quail, pigeons, mountains, and sweet berries ripening in the wilderness:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail

Whistle about us their spontaneous cries:

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness:

And, in the isolation of the sky,

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make

Ambiguous undulations as they sink,

Downward to darkness, on extended wings all my .

(Stanza VIII, II.9-15)

The critic Yvor Winters argues that "Sunday Morning" "is probably the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and is certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English"⁽¹³⁾. All the images in the stanza quoted above are taken from nature and they become far-fetched when the poet combines them by force with the imagination of the woman as well as-of the reader. The images become abstract to stand for imaginary figures in the next world and these natural imageries can be considered as symbolic conceit for the world of imagination, that is the world of beauty. Stevens's theory asserts the, necessity of always beginning anew, always reinventing the figures⁽¹⁴⁾. Stevens heightens the sense of reality when he tries to sublimate reality. According to Stevens. the brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise. As it is remarked by Simons that reading "Sunday Morning" is a profoundly disturbing experience since it discusses the problem of belief in both its metaphysical and theological aspect⁽¹⁵⁾.

"Sunday Morning" consists of eight stanzas, each of fifteen lines. In the first stanza the protagonist is introduced, a lady arising on a Sunday morning and taking her breakfast on a terrace. She

feels the pangs of the conscience for staying home rather than going to Church. She prefers to enjoy the physical beauty of nature instead.

Laic coffee and oranges in a sunny chair

And the green freedom of a cockatto

Upon a rug

(Stanza; 11.1-4)

The images seem unreal to the lady since she is meditating on the meaning of death. Death which is a reality is combined with imagination when Stevens makes the lady imagine Death as a mother of beauty whose job is to calm the noise of reality and this is typically a metaphysical conceit. As it is explained by George Hemphill saying that in "Sunday Morning" Stevens's death "is the mother of beauty in the sense that she hushes us all, but lovingly as a mother hushes her children"⁽¹⁶⁾. The woman does not have a will to be a believer as she is deeply engaged in her desires of "June and evening" as part of the impulse that has led her to give the cockattoo its 'green freedom'.

In the second stanza, Stevens develops his idea through an argument between a stoic hedonist who insists on enjoying the pleasures of this world, as well as suffering the pains of life since there is no life after death. Unlike the hedonist, the woman insists

on enjoying the heavenly reward or she has a hope in the life after death. She refuses to accept his hedonistic solution⁽¹⁷⁾. But soon she changes her mind when the poet convinces her that the delights of the senses are more valuable than the human desire for immortality as in the following lines:

Divinity must live within herself:

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;

.....

Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;

All pleasures and all pains, remembering

The bough of summer and the winter branch.

These are the measures destined for her soul

(Stanza II, 11.9-15)

Then the woman states her preference of death rather than an afterlife. To her, death is "necessary to change, is mother of beauty, and changelessness, even in heaven, is dull and ugly"⁽¹⁸⁾. In the final stanza (the eighth) the immortality of Jesus is rejected and the hope of human resurrection is also abandoned. Stevens himself described this poem as a pagan poem, full of sensuous images. Stevens insists on worshipping life rather than worshipping God. Hence, the blending of argument and imagination which is a speciality of

Stevens is a kind of metaphysical conceit in all its thought and feeling.

The title of the poem (Sunday Morning) can be considered as a Metaphysical emblematic symbolic conceit since it combines two different issues; 'Sunday' which is an emblem of belief in Christianity and 'Morning' which is a symbol of reality and naturalness. Stevens succeeds in stimulating his own imagination firstly and then the readers' and both encounter reality at the same time. And this is one of Stevens's theories that creates a confrontation of imagination with the world. This encounter happens through the creation of what Stevens calls the supreme fiction, that is the belief that poetry or any another thing which creates a meaningful order and pattern in life⁽¹⁹⁾. As it is noticed that **Harmonium** remains a study contrast: for every poem celebrates colours and light and the pleasures of this world⁽²⁰⁾.

The social affairs are obvious in Stevens's "*The Emperor of Ice-Cream*" (1922) which is one of Stevens's most debated lyrics. As with many modern poems, there are a number of possible approaches to it. James Reeves considers it as a symbolist poem; in which each object stands for something else. The poem offers clues about the loneliness of human consciousness and about depression. These two aspects are of a leaden time, time without sympathy or hope; the poem reads as follows:

*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 newspaper.
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 lamb affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream .*

There are many concrete visual images. Line fifteen presents tactile image: "she is cold and dumb". The only abstraction in the poem is line seven "Let be be finale of seem" which has a special

significance. The refrain "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" reminds of childhood and one's own experience when ice-cream is very important. James Reeves believes that ice-cream is "a placatory treat having emotional as well as gustatory significance"⁽²²⁾. Ice-cream stands for a token of love and reassurance as well as it is nice to eat. Ice-cream for the adults is regarded as delicious, so if the child is deprived of ice-cream then he will feel deprived of love and pleasure. So, to the child, ice-cream crowns him as the emperor, for the poem is a memory of innocence.

There is a nostalgia for the past time, the time of infancy. The expression "roller of big cigars" means the father who whips up the "concupiscent curds" to make ice-cream for the child while the child's mother has just died. Both these expressions are conceits since they show far-fetched combinations. There is pun on the refrain 'ice-cream', which is again a metaphysical feature; one to mean delicious eating of the ice-cream, second to mean "scream" or shout for the loss of his mother and the loss of this deliciousness. Thus, the child screams for he is deprived of ice-cream, love and attention. He screams just to attract the attention of his father, exactly like the emperor who gives command with a loud voice. So, the emperor is a conceit as it is compared with the child. Hence, ice-cream can be considered as a symbolic conceit since it stands for

love, reassurance of the innocence which is combined with the cruel, indifferent world of fathers, the world of the experienced.

The phrases "big cigars", "concupiscent", "wenches" are sexual expressions used to show the wide gap between adulthood and childhood. When the speaker who is the child or the adult says "let be be finale of seem" which is an abstract imperative, it may mean let innocence actually exist or let reality or "being", "be" replace this illusion the world of "seem". The interaction of reality with illusion or imagination is a type of conceit used by Stevens.

There is a deathwish in the second stanza which is enhanced by the use of the conceit. The poem deals with father-child situation. It connotes the Freudian Oedipus complex in which a son wishes to murder his father and enjoy his mother. James Reeves argues that the speaker of the poem is the imitator of the child⁽²³⁾. In line: "Let the lamp affix its beam" the meaning is incomplete since "affix its beam" leads to the question: beam of what? Reeves explains this line saying "Let the lamp fix its beam to shine in one direction only...let the shifting lamp stop making things appear ambiguous and concentrate its light upon one area, or in one direction⁽²⁴⁾". This line is considered as a visual metaphor for the line "let be be finale of seem". It is a Stevensian conceit to combine two lines; one related to reality "Let...lamp", the other to the world of imagination "let....seem".

The word "finale" in "let be be finale of seem" belongs to the concert hall or the theatre. The scene in this poem portrays a theatrical situation where the end of a play in act five when the curtain is drawn. The poem describes a funeral, as R. P. Blackmur remarks that:

*The poem might be called Directions for a funeral,
with Two Epitaphs, We have a corpse laid out in
the bedroom and we have people in the kitchen.
The corpse is dead; then let the hoys bring
flowers...The corpse is dead: but let the winches
wear their every day clothes .*

Thus, the poem describes the meaninglessness of death to modern society. So, "finale" can be considered as a theatrical conceit to funeral.

Moreover, the subject of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is at one level poetry itself, since Stevens is likening his own fictions to those depicted in the poem. He praises the power of poetry in the funeral sense. Every object in the poem, for example, furniture, embroidered clothes and so on can be considered as symbolic conceit when it is transformed to our imagination to mean just veneer or pretension, the poem affirms the infidelity of appearances. The poet's art is implicitly compared to the woman's "embroidery"

and this is a metaphysical symbolic conceit. The conceit is intellectual in intention and - intellectual-imaginative in development⁽²⁶⁾. The poem indirectly refers to Stevens's ambivalences about his own fictions. He is ceased to believe in poetry, in fictions and appearances. Thus, he becomes cold and dumb just like the dead woman.

Mark Richardson remarks that the expression 'The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream' is an implicit comparison: the real emperor is either Death which belongs to reality or simply refers to the emperor of ice-cream⁽²⁷⁾. Thus, 'emperor' is used as a symbolic conceit to mean that the only reality or truth is the pleasure of the senses. This method of making images into ideas is a basic characteristic of Stevens's innovative conceit.

The third type of his poems is that which explores a historical event such as Stevens's "*Dance of the Macabre Mice*". The major achievements of Stevens's career are shown around the major historical events of his lifetime: The Great Depression and two World Wars. His writings reveal that he is aware of the events taking place around him and he is often inspired by them. From the first line of the poem, there is an indication for the time and place of the events, in the land of turkeys and turkey weather. There is a retelling of a situation or an occasion. The poem runs as follows:

In the land of turkeys in turkeys weather
At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
Monsieur is on horseback. The horse is covered with mice.

This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword.
Reading the lordly language of the inscription.
Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:

The Founder of the State. Whoever founded
A state that was free, in the dead of winter.
What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering, from mice?
The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!⁽²⁸⁾

In the first stanza, Stevens speaks in the plural tongue about how the mice and the Americans visited a place "the land of turkeys" where a marvelous statue of a well-known French Patriot called Monsieur stands: Monsieur Lafayette rides a horse covered with mice, this far-fetched image is a conceit. The mice dance upon

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the statue. It is a hungry dance as the poet describes it. In the second stanza there is an indication of the language of the lordly speech which is written on the base of the statue. It is musical language just like the music coming out of the strings of "Zithers and tambourines". The last stanza is a kind of direct speech to the Founder of the State, here, the reference is to the United States mixed with a critical tone.

All the previous explanation is the surface meaning of the poem, but there is depth in meaning since it satirizes the United States as a government. To develop his idea, Stevens uses a type of conceit which is the metaphysical one in a way that makes far-fetched comparisons between completely different issues; such as the comparison between history and the dance of the filthy mice. The aspect of similarity is that of 'hungry'; for the mice, their dance is hungry which is inactive out of the cold of winter, while the hungry of history may mean lack of achievements^(*). And this leads to the fact that the history of America lacks the achievements except that of the French Patriot.

(*) Monsieur refers to a revolutionary French Patriot who is well-known for helping the Americans in their strive against British colonial rule. Thus, the Americans considered him as the (Founder) of the U.S.

Another metaphysical conceit is that of 'turkeys'; the ambiguity presents itself in the connection of turkeys with this land. It is in fact a reference to the United States, since in a special day in the year which is the last Thursday in November "turkey weather" when the American eat a special type of birds called turkeys on Thanksgiving Day. This bird once missed its place and landed in the United States, or it may refer to Turkey itself. The background of this occasion is that the original settlers of America were appreciated for finding the native American turkey which is a prime supplier of food after their voyage from England⁽²⁹⁾.

Generally speaking, the grand metaphysical conceit is in the embedded far-fetched comparison between the statue and the hungry dance of mice during the triumph era of democracy and freedom and this is the slogan of the Americans at that time, that is the statue stands for the joyfulness of the high class and their idealism while the hungry dance of mice refers to the population of the early 1930's the time of poverty, hardship and depression. As it is illustrated by James Reeves and Martin Smith that the poem seems to say a hungry dance of insignificant beings, that is mice: Americans about a statue representing national aspirations in all their jubilant purity. Hence, Stevens is a bold writer, as he gives mirror to the self-deceivers of America and shows themselves

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making contempt of the self-conceited American history of pride as the title of his poem conveys.

To conclude, Wallace Stevens was a man in love with marriages: the marriages not just of men and women but of heaven and earth, of idea and image, of the abstract and the concrete, of imagination and reality⁽³⁰⁾. And this marriage is a type of metaphysical conceit typical to Stevens's creativity. In this way, Stevens is to be one profoundly skeptical of history, one deeply invested in the renewing powers of language and finally one whose skepticism sought to confront history and the real and thus achieve what he understood as a poet's major responsibility.

NOTES

1. Mario Klarer, **An Introduction to Literary Studies** (London: Routledge, 1999), p.20.
2. John L. Stewart, "John Crowe Ransom", **Seven Modern American Poets** edited by Leonard Unger (London: Oxford University Press, 67), p. 176.
3. Ibid., p. 179.
4. As quoted by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., **Modernism** (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976) p.25.
5. William York Tindall, "Wallace Stevens", **Seven Modern American Poets** edited by Leonard Unger (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p.51.
6. As quoted by Anca Peiu, "Live Metaphor As Translation In Wallace Stevens" [www.unibuc.ro/e Books/1 Is/Anca peiu-STEVE'NS/ PATRU3.HTM-64k](http://www.unibuc.ro/eBooks/1Is/Anca%20peiu-STEVE'NS/PATRU3.HTM-64k).
7. Andrew Lakritz, "Wallace Stevens", **Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism** edited by Machael Gorden & Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. [www.utoronto-ea/stmikes/library/ research guides/rg literary theory.htm-65k](http://www.utoronto-ea/stmikes/library/research_guides/rg_literary_theory.htm-65k)).

8. As quoted by Ashley Brown & Robert S. Haller, eds., The Achievements of Wallace Stevens (New York: JB Lippincott Company, n.d.) p. 13.
9. Hi Simons, "The Genre of Wallace Stevens". Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays edited by Marie Borroff (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) p.50. .
- 10.M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets; American and British Poetry since World War II (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 177.
- 11.Geoffrey Thurley, The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid-Century (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.224.
12. All my quotations will be taken from The Oxford Book of American Verse Chosen with an Introduction by F. O. Matthiessen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.638.
- 13.As quoted by George, S. Lensing, "Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop: The Way a Poet Should See, The Way a Poet Should Think" The Wallace-Stevens Journal, 19 (1995), p.127.

- 14."Imagination An Insurance: Wallace Stevens And Benjamin Lee Whore At The Hartford", **Legal Studies Forum**, 24 (2000): 489.
- 15."The Genre of Wallace Stevens", p.44.
- 16.George Hemphill, "Alien Tale", **Seven Modern American Poets** edited by Leonard Unger (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.261.
- 17.Harold Bloom, **Wallace Stevens The Poems of Our Climate** (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p.39.
- 18.Harry Brown & John Milstead, **What The Poem Means** (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970), p.224.
- 19.Richard Gray, **American Poetry of the Twentieth Century** (London and New York: Longman, 1990), p.92.
- 20."Live Metaphor As Translation", p.84.
- 21.**The Oxford Book of American Verse**, pp.628-629.

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22. James Reeves and Martin Seymour-Smith, **Inside Poetry** (London-Oxford University Press, 1987), p.85.
23. Ibid, p.87.
24. Ibid, p.88.
25. **The Achievements of Wallace Stevens**, p.59.
26. "The Genre of Wallace Stevens", p.50.
27. Mark Richardson "The Emperor of Ice Cream"
unix.cc.wmich.edu/ cooneys / tchg / 640 / Mark.
Emperor. html-17k.
28. **The Oxford Book of American Verse**, p.658.
29. **Inside Poetry**, p.53.
30. Susan B, Weston, W. S. **An Introduction To The Poetry**
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