
UNIT 3 WALLACE STEVENS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- talk about Wallace Stevens the poet, his life and work;
- appreciate two significant poems of Wallace Stevens;
- analyse the thematic aspects of the two poems.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will acquaint you with another American modernist poet, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). We shall study the two famous poems composed by him, “The Snow Man” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream”, both are included in his first poetry collection *Harmonium* published in 1923. Even though Stevens’ poetic style underwent change in his later collections, it had a strong base in his initial experiments in *Harmonium*. Studying the two poems in the course we will realize Stevens’ place in American modernism and see how his works interact with the literary trend in question. In this unit, we shall discuss his manner of expression and grasp the ideas his poems deal with.

3.2 ABOUT THE POET

Wallace Stevens was born in 1879, at Reading in Pennsylvania. A lawyer by education, Stevens had moved to New York soon after graduating from Harvard. He attended New York Law School and worked for a number of years in a few law firms. Eventually, he moved to the insurance sector and occupied a high position in a company where he worked until the end of his life. Adopting these ways of earning livelihood, Stevens wrote poems at night. His *Harmonium* was published in 1923. Following this, he published a number of collections until the 1950s, when he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and his health deteriorated. Some of his collections include, *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*

(1937), *Parts of a World*, along with *Transport to Summer*. In 1950 he wrote *The Auroras of Autumn* and in 1954 he published his last collection of *Collected Poems* (1954), for which he also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, shortly before his death.



(Image Source: Wikimedia Commons)

He loved travelling to Florida and used to live at a hotel close to the sea. This experience is believed to have influenced his poetry, too. While at Harvard, he was under the tutelage of philosopher George Santayana whom he immensely admired. During his visits to Florida, he also met Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway, both great poets of his time. But he is known to have entered into a serious disagreement with both. On his death in 1954, the other major poet of the day, William Carlos Williams, wrote the obituary for Stevens.

Stevens is known for his long as well as short poems. One undeniable characteristic of his verses is that they are steeped in philosophy, to the extent of appearing too abstract to comprehend. A number of twenty-first century critics observed it. Simon Critchley, has remarked that “Stevens’ poetry fails”. In it, failure could be interpreted as the inability of words to adequately represent reality. But the validity of this remark might be ascertained in the course of reading his poems.

3.3 WALLACE STEVENS: THE POETIC CRAFT

Poems of Wallace Stevens belong to the American modernist trend. However, we must understand that while different writers or poets are associated with one literary trend or the other, each of them interacts with its conventions in a manner of one’s own. Such is also the case with Stevens. Unlike Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, language in Stevens’ poems is direct and straightforward. The syntax is such that there is no break in the meaning to be conveyed or the flow of the idea. This is in sharp contrast to classic modernist poems that strongly experiment with form as well as content to the extent that they become abstract in an extreme sense. Breaking away from the established trends was a hallmark of modernist aesthetics. However, Stevens is not experimental to the point that meaning might collapse in the pursuit.

One traces characteristics of the imagist movement in his poems, a movement that flourished in the twenties. This movement was one of the important trends falling under the broader category of modernism. Imagism was characterised by the poet using sharp images in his verses, each with an elaborate method. Imagist poems have word pictures that make the reader visualize the exact object being described. Ezra Pound pioneered this movement. William Carlos Williams is also known to have subscribed to this trend. In a number of his early poems Stevens does create such vivid word pictures. One example is the poem in our course “The Snow Man”. Also, in “A Sunday Morning”, Stevens resorts to the use of distinct imagery. The difference is that in the process, he also innovates and combines abstract words with concrete images. That saves him from obscurity. Consider the following stanza from “A Sunday Morning”.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

In the above stanza Stevens creates the comfortable domestic atmosphere with images of a “peignoir”, a woman’s light night gown working in association with “coffee and oranges in a sunny chair” and the “rug”. Here, mark the abstract words he uses with these images. “Complacencies” denotes comfort with oneself. The poet talks about complacencies of the nightgown, and indicates through it the laid-back mood of a participant in the scene. “Green freedom” tells of the sense of openness felt by a bird as it flies in the greens and “late coffee” brings to mind the hot drinks one sips at leisure. We notice, thus, how abstractions mingle with clearly defined images in Stevens poems. Even in “The Snow Man”, the poet creates images of a harsh winter “bough of pine trees crusted with snow”, and “junipers shagged with ice” but he combines them with philosophical questions of logical links. For him, “One must have a winter’s mind” to regard such coldness. The idea conveyed to us is of the mind of winter to be deciphered in the larger universe of the poem. This melange of distinct images and philosophical reflections creates Stevens’ own brand of Imagism that is difficult to comprehend but engages the reader’s attention.

In the poem “A High Toned Old Christian Woman”, we read: “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” For Stevens, the poetic mode is characterised by imagination. It is this fiction or creative flight that becomes the carrier for ruminations about the questions of being, death, and life. In the “Snow Man”, we observe further read: “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” or in “The Emperor of Ice cream” to the effect: “Let be be finale of seem.” These two poems are in our course. We shall interpret these statements later in our discussion. Here, let us take up “The Snow Man” at length.

3.4 “THE SNOW MAN”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

*One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;*

*And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter*

In these lines, the poet talks about the attitude of an individual in the period of extreme winters. He evokes sharp images to create the atmosphere of winter. “Frost”, “pine trees crusted with snow”, “junipers shagged with ice” are the words and phrases he uses to bring out a sense of the ice-cold weather. We may note that the trees mentioned are all conifers and they have borne the effect of cold for a long time. Conifers are trees that grow in cold climates, hence their nature to survive in extreme weather conditions. The poet points out there is something particularly harsh about winter that has damaged the junipers. Even the spruces appear “rough”. The poet refers to a prolonged spell of cold weather that has adversely impacted the trees.

We are made to observe that in order for one to appreciate such a winter, “one must have a mind of winter/ to regard the frost”. The word employed to suggest this is “regard.” There is a kind of particularity about this use. In the opinion of poet, the individual should interpret the winter for what it is, instead of having a judgemental view of the phenomenon. The trees are described as bearing the brunt of the cold weather and appearing damaged. Yet, the individual is not shown to associate winter with severity and rejection. The poet wishes that the reader saw it objectively, indeed “regard the frost” as given. For driving the point home, he says, “One must have a mind of winter”. We note that the word “winter” describes the mind that is capable of observing the scene dispassionately.

At another level, Stevens wishes to indicate that objectivity might call for maturity enabling one to be closer to the scene and yet maintain distance. There is a difference between dispassionate observation and cold indifference. The individual does not pay sufficient attention to the cold weather. The response in the poem is complex, hence the poet’s conclusion: “one must have a mind of winter.” In such a case, there is no place for emotional biases in favour of or against the surroundings. Following this, let us consider the following lines:

*Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,*

*Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place*

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

The train of thought continues here from the previous lines. Mark that there are no full stops in the lines. We spot only a solitary semicolon separating the two major strands of the idea. In the beginning, the importance of a clinical attitude

of the observer who is in the midst of extreme winter is noted. Later, it is stressed that one should not associate sadness with the harsh winter wind. The landscape is bleak, with no hope of newness. We observe that the leaves are “few” and the land is “bare”. The atmosphere does not warrant the individual to associate the emotion of sorrow with the dreary wind. One has to further refrain from imagining situations that are away from the scene. The poet states that “the listener...nothing himself beholds”. Next come the lines that play on the word “nothing”—the observer does not assume that which is not there “and the nothing that is” draws our attention to it. The landscape characterised by nothingness is the reality he confronts while he assumes nothing, only focusing attention on the nothingness that the place signifies. Why is “nothing” emphasized so specifically? Perhaps, the poet finds the world around him to be meaningless, with no aspect in it inspiring enough to sustain him. The absence of belonging between the spectacle in front and the person looking at it is a comment on the society itself that the poet inhabits. In that sense, nature is a metaphor of the dullness of situation the poet is forced to bear. In the beginning, we talked about death, life, and the poet’s being as inter-related. That is truly signified by these lines. Without allowing the tedium of life to enter the description, the poet has evoked an image of stillness, cold, and desolation. But the very absence of actual happenings and episodes that may have filled the picture call out for a comment. The heaviness of the details gathered in the lines begin telling the story of “what is not there and the nothing that is.”

3.5 “THE SNOW MAN”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The poem represents objectivity of perspective that shows blankness and a dreary world. In it, the speaker gives a voice to the mental state that has stopped to comment on the happenings of the time the poem aimed to capture. Alert individuals were needed to comprehend a certain question of being in the given surroundings. Ironically though, the accusing finger pointed towards the individuals themselves. As a result of this, viewing the cold winter became an issue. For this viewing, no emotion was required, nor was it therefore expressed. Undeniably, emotion would have underlined the truth of the circumstance. But truth was elusive. It could not be formulated in clear terms. Describing a mental state would have created the background of an argument, but in turn the argument might have reduced the scope of envisioning the situation in depth. That is the conundrum the modern individual faces. Words and phrases do not suffice. When vacancy and emptiness are the issues, images would do a better job than statements. Thus, trees covered in snow and standing quiet become better carriers of the veracity of the scene. The land may be an apt reference, with roads, pathways and streets as its pointers. But the social scene has problems of quiet suffering and helpless existence than of clashing interests and priorities. The episode of struggle has shifted from the given society to far off places where different patterns exist. There is no visible warmth or comfort to be seen. A place that is bare, with sharp winds blowing through it, is to be considered for making sense of. The speaker is given the situation “one must have a mind of winter/ to regard the winter/ to regards the frost.” Interestingly, mind has shifted from the citizen to the winter season. “Mind of winter” makes sense under the perspective of modernist expression. Consider that the place of the poet has more of snow than human exchange. The same is denoted by the “sound of the wind...which is the sound of the land.” Such an approach of saying and unsaying gives precedence to

rationality over sentimentality. This also puts in perspective the title of the poem, “The Snowman”. Snow, that indicates coldness could be a parallel for rationality. The individual observer witnessing the winter in a detached manner brings to mind the image of the snowman.

The language used is direct for most part of “The Snow man.” It is descriptive, bringing alive the scene of extreme winter. The cluster of images evoking the frost, the snow, the cold trees, few leaves and a bare land, make the poem very close to an imagist one. The poem comprises direct expression of well-constructed word-pictures. The poem also displays economy in the use of words. One may note that the first two stanzas have a mix of visual and tactical images that extend to the feeling of close contact— “pine trees crusted with snow”, “junipers shagged with ice”, “spruces rough”, “distant glitter”. In the following stanzas, the poet shifts to auditory images, representing the winter season by means of sound. The wind blowing across trees, leaves conveying messages through movement, and the sound emanating from the land are examples. These evoke a sense of desolation that is characteristic of places related to climate. We notice that the distinct imagery brings out a consolidated sense of coldness, detachment, objectivity and reason. One can say that it is reminiscent of the time when the poem was composed. That was in 1921, four years after the First World War ended. The atmosphere was such that everything was called into question in the face of widespread violence and destruction. In such an atmosphere, while some artists gave in to despair, Stevens vouched for distance and detachment. That indicated the coping mechanism whereby the individual regards the surroundings for what they actually are. This reminds us of what T.S Eliot remarked in his famous essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1921) saying, Poetry “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.” In the act of escaping, the poet creates a distance from his expression because of which the writing assumes a detached character. We can see it happening in the case of Stevens.

Another significant feature of “The Snowman” is its beginning and the end, both of which contain philosophical suggestions. The phrase “mind of winter” does not carry a direct meaning, unless one interprets the word ‘winter’ as suggesting an approach. Likewise, the poem ends with an equally abstract assertion that reads more like a conundrum—”Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” as stated above. The speaker says in the poem that the individual beholds or sees nothing that is not present before his eyes. Instead, “the nothing that is” stands for the the winter landscape that is characterised by bareness.

3.6 “THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

*Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.*

Let be be finale of seem.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

These lines have a speaker giving instructions to people for doing various chores. “Call the...muscular one”, “bid him”, “let the boys bring flowers” are the phrases that establish it is an occasion and the speaker wants a few things done in the case. The foremost among them is that he wants the ice cream vendor to come and whip the ice-cream. This is done through calling it “concupiscent”. It is a strange use of the word that means something driven by the sexual desire. Using this word for the ice cream brings out the mood of the speaker; there is an over-indulgence in sense experience of the things around. The speaker is either in a philosophical state or the occasion is such that it involves heightened sexual desire. Next, he gives instruction for the children; girls can wear ordinary clothes and “dawdle”, that means to move idly and slowly. The fact that girls’ movement is not brisk or full of joy gives us a hint that the occasion is not a joyous one. And the ice cream being prepared can be part of the ‘treats’ for the funeral. In some Western cultures, funeral is a big event involving elaborate preparations and arrangements. It is not a sober affair, unlike in the Indian context. Hence the boys are asked to bring flowers, “in last month’s newspapers”. This phrase further puts the mood in perspective. Flowers are not for gifting, nor are they to spell a happy occasion. That is why they are being brought in old newspapers. The occasion is not celebratory and joyous.

The last two lines of the stanza are philosophical. That is denoted by “Let be be finale of seem”. The first “be” in the sentence refers to the reality of existence and “seem” points towards a different realm of existence, that, too, of appearance than reality. The speaker reiterates that material existence is the culmination (“finale”) of everything that is in the realm of ideas alone. All that is manifest in reality is the truth meant to be accepted. All that we conceptualise in terms of abstract existence holds meaning till the time it exists in the form of a material reality. Mark the words, “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream”. Maker of the Ice cream, a dish being made on the occasion, is Death, the one who has ultimate authority. Death is the only sovereign whom nobody can defeat or deny.

Take from the dresser of deal,

Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet

On which she embroidered fantails once

And spread it so as to cover her face.

If her horny feet protrude, they come

To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Let the lamp affix its beam.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Consider that in these lines, the speaker’s instructions have continued further from the previous stanza. This is the moment when someone would “take from the dresser...that sheet”. Flowers, the sheet, and pudding—are all needed for a funeral. The speaker asks the individual to take out the same sheet from the drawer on which the woman had embroidered birds (“fantails”). It is stressed that the same sheet should be used to cover the woman’s dead face. There is a

strong irony here—the sheet the woman happily embroidered is the one being used to cover her dead body. This brings out the stark reality death is, something none can deny nor defy. The morbid description of the corpse continues as the poet delves deep into details. In case, he suggests, the sheet proves insufficient for covering her up completely, it shall show the icy coldness associated with death and a complete absence and movement (“to show how cold she is, and dumb”).

It is clearly stated in the stanza that the lamp, ritualistically lit near the head of the dead body, should affix its beam. The lamplight should be fixed, without flickering or fading out. Having described in detail, and instructed meticulously about preparations for the funeral, the poet reverts to the refrain that, for him, establishes death’s sovereignty.

3.7 “THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The poem is an eclectic mix of a tone which is instructional, at times philosophical and on occasions involving words which are abstract. We may note that these seemingly different elements coexist in the same imaginative universe, contributing to the poem’s unique style. Let us first understand the instructional tone and the discordant words used. The speaker gives instructions for carrying out various tasks, as if in preparation of an occasion. “Call”, “bid him”, “let the boys” are the phrases which establish this. The instructions are cascading, appearing one after the other. This brings out a tone of urgency, pointing to the need to be meticulous in the tasks that need to be done. One notes a somewhat discordant sense evoked by the words “muscular” and “concupiscent”, used to describe the ice cream man and ice cream respectively. We call them discordant because these words bring out a sense of physical detail and pleasure, which oddly coexists with the otherwise matter of fact instructive tone of the speaker.

Next, the tone is also philosophical, though sparingly. The first stanza has the statement, “Let be be finale of seem”. This statement comes as an abrupt shift after the instructions given by the speaker for the occasion. It introduces the important duality of appearance and reality. The word “be” takes us to the material world and “seem” points to that which we ‘perceive’, adding our own objective understanding to what we see. Hence the appearance of subjective and tentative while conversely the verifiability of material reality. The phrase indicates that existence is the culmination of that which is perceived or visualised. Thereafter, the refrain “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream” is not without its share of abstraction, too. The foremost thing we note here is that the word ‘emperor’ appears someone with absolute power and as such used as ice cream. The two words of completely opposite kind gets proximity to each other, further contributing to the discordant word-usage indicated above. When read together, the two assertions give us a hint of the meaning expressed in the poem. Talking of existence, appearance, and sovereignty, the poet pre-empts what is to come in the poem next, that being the reference to death and the dead body. The ice cream is one of the puddings made on the occasion of funeral and is the only sovereign truth in such a case. It affirms death as the only absolute power in the overall context of material reality.

In a significant sense, the delayed revelation of the central subject or idea in the poem is brought into focus. This, along with the eclectic mix of tones used in the poem contributes to its experimental nature, making it a modernist one. The occasion, which is actually a funeral, is not made clear in the beginning. It is only towards the end of the poem that the reader makes sense of the details and understands the exact occasion for which instructions are given. This is a unique feature of the poem— even though the central subject is death, yet the atmosphere of the poem remains distant from the pale of the subject. Nowhere is present a sense of sadness or despair. The speaker’s state of mind has remained uninfluenced by the occasion. This is clear from the way instructions for the funeral preparations are not given. The sentiment is further highlighted when we notice the speaker referring to the woman’s dead body specifically. He asks for it to be covered, “if her horny feet protrude, they come to show how cold she is and dumb”. The words “cold” signifies the lack of warmth which further indicates absence of life. The word “dumb” signifies absence of sound. And the feet are “horny”, which is a word used to suggest her excitable nature when she was alive. See how the words are used to describe the corpse—they are direct and visual, to the point of being nasty and crude. Rather than being devoid of sadness, the poem becomes literal and crass in the descriptions of the dead body.

3.8 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WALLACE STEVENS

Peter Schjeldhal has observed: “[Stevens] is certainly the quintessential American poet of the twentieth century, a doubting idealist who invested slight subjects (the weather, often) with oracular gravitas, and grand ones (death, frequently) with capering humour.” This is a comment on both the poems included in our course, “The Snow Man” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream”. If Stevens is a doubting idealist, it would be incumbent on us to recognize in the two poems a sense of detached interest. The poet could be accused of not taking a position where the position was due.

We may keep in mind that Stevens was closer to the First World War, and also apart of radical break from traditional modes of expression. In that context, artists invented new means of articulating a reality that had lost positive appeal in the face of mass destruction. Radical changes were seen in the aesthetic approach, too. Stevens avoids experimentation. William Carlos Williams in *Wallace Stevens*. Poetry, Vol. 87, Jan. 1956 has said: “Technically, Stevens was not, as were many of his contemporaries, an experimentalist.” Indeed, one might observe selective emphases and an abstract philosophical strain coexisting in his poems.

We note also that Stevens was not as much of an Imagist as his contemporaries William Carlos Williams or Mariane Moore were. “[His] early poetry is clearly marked by the influence of Imagism, yet at the same time the poems depart from the Imagist practice in their far greater tendency to abstraction and philosophical argument” (Critchley), We recognize in it the modernist imagist influence informed by ruminations about death and philosophical concerns such as reality, appearance, and existence. Reiterating it, Simon Critchley has stated that Stevens’ poetry “contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight...and that this insight is best expressed poetically.”

In these perspectives we note the recognition Stevens received from the criticism of the time. He was appreciative of it but did hint at limitations regarding position. Ambivalence in position was the factor that drew notice.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In the poem “The Snow Man,” we understand how Wallace Stevens used cold weather as a means of making significant observations about human attitude to surroundings, and the broader idea of dispassionate observation. In it, he is able to combine the reference to nature with what he noticed in the destinies the people around him confronted. He also evoked the idea of “nothingness” linked to the bare land in the midst of cold winters. Nothingness is a philosophical concept central to most of the modernist writings. The sheer destruction caused by the War and a complete lack of hope was visualised as ‘nothingness’ by a great number of European writers of the twentieth century. While Stevens touched upon modernist themes, he did not fully subscribe to the movement’s penchant for aesthetic experimentation. He had a selfhood and a sense of identity that set him apart from the usual run of the modernist minds. In the poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”, we notice the imagist influence as in the previous poem, and also the poet’s departure from it at a few places elsewhere. He departed from the conventions of imagism by introducing abstract words, along with concrete word pictures. In this poem, he used the subject of death but ironically the poem’s atmosphere was far from morbid and dreary, an intuitive expectation while dealing with the subject. Instead, Stevens dealt with death with rational detachment evident in the instructive, clinical tone of the poem and in his detailed description of the dead body focusing on its being cold and silent. Thereafter, he chose the image of ice cream to indicate funeral preparations and indicated through it the poet’s attitude towards this truth. It did reflect the elaborate ceremony particular to funerals in western societies, but its emphasis exhibited by the poem’s refrain “the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream” brought into open the poet’s preoccupation with the subject. Even this subject is reminiscent of the post First World War climate fraught with ideas of death, destruction, and meaninglessness.

3.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) Comment on the speaker’s tone in the poem “The Emperor of Ice Cream”.
- 2) What is the significance of the phrase “one needs a mind of winter” in the poem “The SnowMan”? Explain.
- 3) ‘Wallace Stevens is an Imagist poet with a difference’. Comment on the statement with reference to the two poems in your course
- 4) Stevens’ poems are significantly philosophical. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer with references from “The SnowMan” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”.

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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