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Wallace Stevens and The Meaning of Poetry

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Abstract

In the midst of chaos and destruction, Modernism brought a wave of surmounting opposition against the constructions of literary (and non-literary) art forms. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is just one example of the resistance to traditional forms as well as opposition to fatalistic worldviews of the time. Pieces like "Sunday Morning" and "The High-Toned Old Christian Woman" show a "godless universe" that is substituted by art and the mundane movements of everyday life. Stevens finds such replacements by exploring the "nature of poetry" and by extension refocusing the meaning of death in a life surrounded by it.

In order to understand how Stevens creates a replacement for the godless and makes room for a world of art and the mundane, I first explore what poetry means for other influential authors, like Robert Eugene Doud, Martin Heidegger, and William Carlos Williams. I then compare these varied analyses to the responsibilities that Stevens creates for poetry and the poet. I also look at other critics like Heather Harrison Thomas which provide insight on the influence that partaking in religious practices may have on writing poetry within Stevens' own life. While Bethany Hicok discusses Stevens' "artistic endeavors" and recounts his definition of the poet, their creation, and of the "supreme fiction" to create a world that is bearable to live in (128-29). Jeannine Johnson also partakes in the conversation Thomas and Hicok discuss but adds the importance of the "why" of poetry which many poets during the Modernist movement became reluctant to explore. I then use all these sources to conclude that all these qualities of poetry create a bearable reality in a world surrounded by chaos.

Having a better understanding on the research already on Stevens and others' interpretations of poetry I move on to analyze Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" to study what Stevens aims to create as a poet. I use the definitions and objectives put forth by Stevens to build a foundation of the development of his writing. Soon after I discuss Stevens' book *Harmonium* which provides more insight on said development. In his book many pieces may be traditional in form and although paradoxical to what Stevens believes, his mocking subject matter actually breaks these traditional literary forms and help him create a "supreme fiction"—a form that is uniquely his (Hicok 126). Giving some background on Stevens and his writing I continue to provide some background on the historical events leading up to the belief that the world was (and may still be) a "godless universe." I then introduce Stevens' solution—recreating a new type of world—which is visible in "Sunday Morning" where the creation of a new "paradise" is contemplated (Stevens 49-51). The previous conversation then allows me to focus on "The High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and discuss the dialogue that takes place between religion and poetry while adding the importance of imagination for creating the "paradise" from "Sunday Morning." Finally, I bring all this together to refocus the meaning of death where death is no longer salvation or the continuation of the life but rather the end of an

"earthy paradise" (Thomas 8).

1. The "Nature of Poetry"

There have been many opinions about what exactly constitutes poetry and sets it apart from other art forms. Stevens, being a central figure of the Modernist movement, often discussed the job of the poet and the role of poetry in modern society. Before beginning to review Stevens' parameters of poetry it is important to mention other interpretations that may agree or disagree with Stevens' framework. Robert Eugene Doud in "Poetry, Poetics and the Spiritual Life" for example, focuses on "appreciating the dynamics of theology and spirituality as analogous to the dynamics of poetry" (55). As it will be explained later in this text, Stevens too created a poetry that was "analogous to" religion (yet, that is not to say, as important as poetry). Stevens created poetry that mimicked belief and spirituality by comparing what poetry and religion aim to do. Doud continues his explanation of these dynamics (poetry and theology) by stating that, "[f]or Heidegger, poetry is not a late-emerging use of language to embellish direct expression, but rather constitutes the original basis of language in the way humans complete the natural world by giving things names and descriptions" (55). In other words, what Heidegger meditated upon and what Doud recounts is that poetry is not *a* way of expression but *the* way of expression—it is the means through which individuals can create language and give it meaning. William Carlos Williams would agree with this assertion now that poetry for him at least, aimed to focus on "No ideas but in things" or in other words, focus on the physical and material world (McMichael and Leonard 1451). Similarly, Stevens also strove to focus on the physicality of the world (with the use of his avid descriptions) as opposed to the spiritual or abstract world of belief. Continuing his explanation on poetics Doud remarks that "Heidegger saw poetic or meditative thought as the chief prerogative of the human mind and the chief means of finding and achieving fulfillment for human beings. But Heidegger also perceived that the prevailing values of the modern world were inimical to this fulfillment" (55). It seems then from this observation that poetry for Heidegger is a way to find fulfillment within the self but things like "values of the modern world" become barriers to find that fulfillment.

These claims are important because in what seemed a hopeless world, poetry (for Stevens) provided an escape from that subjective reality and created order where there was chaos. It was a way to escape those "values of the modern world" and "[achieve] fulfillment for human beings" (Doud 55). In this case, through the creation of order and Stevens' use of the "supreme fiction," poetry could achieve "fulfillment for human beings" (Doud 55). The problem lies in "the prevailing values of the modern world" like that of religion which damage or obstruct this fulfillment from occurring (Doud 55). While Stevens opposes religion, Doud, on the other hand, argues that "[t]he thinking process involved in praying is naturally grounded in a poetics that is receptive to the spoken and written word" (56). Doud discusses the importance of the habits that arise from praying and the influence that it may have on writing poetry. To understand where Stevens fits in with this, Heather Harrison Thomas gives some background on Stevens in her work "'Ancient Wisdom' to 'Supreme Fiction': Ideas of God in the Poetry of H.D. and Wallace Stevens." Thomas states that Wallace Stevens was raised "in the Presbyterian church with a Puritan conscience" and that he "struggled with the spiritual questions about heaven, hell, justice, and evil raised by the furious changes of modern life, concluding that he was brought up to inhabit a world that no longer existed" (3). Despite his upbringing, Stevens was not grounded at all in religious dogma in his later life because he decided he lived in a world "that no longer existed" (Thomas 3). His religious upbringing then is a major influence that pushed Stevens to write a poetry that deals with religion but completely decon-

structs it. Going forth it is also noted that "Heidegger was attracted to poetry as a mode of discourse that allows the most basic attitude or disposition of human existence to be articulated and celebrated" (Doud 58). Unlike Heidegger, Stevens does not necessarily celebrate "human existence" (as a whole) and does not condemn it either (like T.S. Eliot), but rather he creates a bearable way to look at the "reality" of life through individuals' own "supreme fiction" (Doud 58). Doud comes to the same conclusion stating that "[Stevens] was concerned in his poetry with how the mind and imagination find or shape the realities of order and meaning in what he calls the 'slovenly wilderness', or chaos, of the world before it comes into knowing and active relationships with human concerns" (63).

Bethany Hicok in her piece "Freud, Modernity, and the 'Father Nucleus' in Wallace Stevens" also provides insight into Stevens' "artistic endeavors" (128). In "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" Hicok explains that Stevens "reasserted the modernist values of abstraction and pleasure as fundamental to artistic endeavors" and also "reasserted the power of the imagination to push back against the violent reality of global war, brutal totalitarian governments, and economic disaster: 'It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality"' (128-29). Through her piece, Hicok also discusses Stevens' talk at Princeton in 1942 where Stevens himself talks about the poet's "function" (126). Hicok quotes Stevens:

> "[I]t is not," he told his audience, "to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it…to comfort them while they follow their leaders to and fro" (CPP 660). His "function," rather, "is to make his imagination theirs"; consequently, "he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (CPP 660–61). The poet's role, "in short," Stevens argued, "is to help people to live their lives" (*CPP* 661).

In other words, Stevens states that a poet's job is to relate to the people in order to help them "live their lives." Hicok continues to relay Stevens' speech in which Stevens explains that an author has this much autonomy—of helping "people live their lives"—because "'he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it' (*CPP* 662; my emphasis)" (126). The poet then not only influences the lives of the people by relating to their "imagination" but also by creating a world—a "supreme fiction"—that they "turn incessantly" to. The poet, according to Stevens, is able to conceive of what people "are unable to conceive" and during Modernism, this statement may have been true because individuals might have simply been unable to "conceive" of another "reality" than the one they saw before their very eyes. In this sense I would agree with Thomas, where she states that "Stevens re-conceptualizes poetry itself as a modern form of redemption" in which poets can "demonstrate poetry's capacity to redeem the human spirit singed by historical disasters and existential alienation" (1). In other words, poetry (especially that of Stevens') should be able to save the "human spirit" from the chaos and disaster of the world at that time and (Stevens may argue) even in this time. Unlike what previous authors have said, Thomas adds that the type of "visionary poetry" that Stevens was creating paved the way for "creating common ground" and being "a catalyst for compassionate dialogue across religious divides that are used to fuel global conflict" (1).

Jeannine Johnson in "Wallace Stevens' Defense of Poetry in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"' contributes to the conversation put forth by Hicok and Thomas by adding that in addition to relating to the people and providing redemption and dialogue a poet should also cultivate questioning—the "why"—that according to

Stevens and other poets people "had become indifferent to" (24). To expand on this, the question of "why" dealt with poetry itself, another of poetry's aims was to question poetry's meaning and place in society. In exploring the meaning of poetry and the purpose it serves the poem refreshes life in two ways. First by refreshing "an understanding of a new poetic tradition" and then by creating a "supreme fiction" that is new for each person (Johnson 29). Another quality of poetry that Johnson claims is essential in Stevens' writing is "Nobility" which stands for "a function of nothing less than our instinct for self-preservation and through it poetry quite literally endows life with meaning" (32). It is clear then that by asking and exploring the "why" of poetry, the poet and by consequence poetry come to reflect an art that redeems "the human spirit" by creating a unique "supreme fiction" for every reader (Thomas 1).

2. "Of Modern Poetry"

The opening line of Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" returns to Johnson's question of "why." Stevens writes, "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice" (1-2). Here, "the poem of the mind" refers to the poem inspired by the imagination—it has not been created yet and Stevens sets out, in the rest of the poem, to find what "will suffice" or what will make a poem whole (Stevens 1-2). Stevens states that the poet did not "always had/ To find" or go in search of what the poem should accomplish but other times, specifically those before Modernism, "the scene was set" and poets simply had to "[repeat] what/ Was in the script" (3-5). Following the prolonged break in line Stevens continues to say that although the "script" was once set the "theatre was changed/ To something else" explaining that the scene for writing has changed and with that change the poem must also change—hence the search for a poem that "will suffice" (6-7). The line that follows—"Its past was a souvenir"—explains that the poetry that was is now just a memory—a souvenir (7). With this simple yet dense line, Stevens may even be hinting at the fact that the past has something to offer—it was ideal, it is, after all, a "souvenir" and not a demonic talisman. Following this brief introduction, Stevens sets out the framework of the poem he seeks—"It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place" and meet the men and women "of the time" (8-10). If the poem is "living" then it must change like all other living things. This change may occur because of the time period and by the people in that period. More so, the poem must be about the people of the time—it has to relate to people and by extension, adapt. As Stevens has already stated, the "theatre" of poetry has changed and the ideal pictures of what encompassed it has changed along with it, now poetry has to "think about war" or the bad alongside the good (10).

In a new stage, poetry must meditate and think about those things that matter to the people—in thinking about the things people want to hear it must also generate something that these people will also "repeat" to themselves (14-15). It must also, "speak words" but not "to the play, but to itself" showing that poetry must be about poetry—for example, this specific poem is about the act of writing poetry. The poet must always think about the purpose of poetry and create a poem that points to this purpose (Stevens 18). As an actor, the poem also has to be a "metaphysician in the dark"—an expert of the essence of being and of the practice of knowing and use that knowledge to play "An instrument" and string a song of "rightness" and happiness for many (21-23). Stevens concludes by stating that "It must/ Be the finding of a satisfaction" and so poetry must be pleasurable and about the mundane movements of life that bring happiness like that "of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing" (27-29). Returning to Johnson's question of "why," by exploring the question of "why" the poet "describes (as well as engenders) the paradoxical condition of achieving illumination through the obscuring act of the poem" (Johnson 27). Stevens' poetry is no doubt obscure

but his point, as he describes in "Of Modern Poetry" is for poetry not to make life harder than it already is. To conclude then, in Stevens' case, poetry must relate to people, be "living" and therefore adapt to the changes of the time, talk about the good as well as touch upon the bad, and transmit pleasure especially by talking about what matters to people. It is then these aspects of poetry that will be examined in "Sunday Morning" and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" in the context of Stevens' "godless universe."

3. A Godless Universe: *Harmonium*

Harmonium (1923), the book of poetry that essentially began Stevens' writing career did not hold great acclaim following publication. As a matter of fact, "fewer than one hundred copies were sold" which "almost led him to abandon poetry" (McMichael and Leonard 1435). This attitude toward its publication may be explained by the fact that it "was part of a revolution in American poetry" that in 1923 individuals would not have been willing to yet accept or even come into dialogue with (McMichael and Leonard 1435). Since Stevens' poetry was just beginning to take root—many of the poems within *Harmonium* (including "Sunday Morning," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream") were "relatively traditional in form" (McMichael and Leonard 1435). The traditional form in his poetry may be attributed to the fact that Stevens was just beginning to find his style but also Stevens may have done this mockingly. One issue that tied all writers during the Modernist period was the issue centered on the use of literary tradition. Some thought that works using traditional poetic forms and language were simply old-fashioned and outdated. To others, a work that did not honor tradition was simply branded as inadequate. Finally, to others like Stevens, literary history would have been acknowledged best by alluding to traditional forms and then breaking literary forms. In fact, in "Of Modern Poetry" Stevens' first stanza mentions that "[poetry's] past was a souvenir" showing the importance of the "past" as offering something to the new poetry of the time but distinctly separating old poetry from new poetry (7). Although the poems may have been "traditional in form" their content was not. In this case, "Stevens had rebelled against the 'stale intelligence' of the past" wanting to "'make a new intelligence prevail'" and eventually adopted "a variety of experimental styles" which is seen in the movement from the strict blank verse of "Sunday Morning" (1915) to the lose blank verse of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" and in the free verse form of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1922) (McMichael and Leonard1435). Eventually, *Harmonium* was reprinted in 1931 and now having been well into the Modernist era (1900/1915-1945/1950) its new-found success is reasonable. With the reprinting of his book, Stevens began to publish once again and "confronted the contemporary abandonment of traditional values and sought to come to terms with the confusions of his time" (McMichael and Leonard 1435). Stevens did this by evaluating the meaning of Modernism and the "nature of poetry" which led many readers to think that "Stevens had carried originality to the point of mere eccentricity" (McMichael and Leonard 1435). In an attempt to find the varied meanings of Modernism, Andrew J. Angyal in "Wallace Stevens' 'Sunday Morning' as Secular Belief" states that Stevens, "[f]aced with this conflict between a will to believe and an inability to believe in the old order. . . spent a lifetime seeking an alternative, which he called at various times the "Idea of Order" and the 'Supreme Fiction"' (31). In this case then, in the modern world, Stevens realized that structures of human life were now faulty human constructions that would not work for the new time. This realization led Stevens to question one of the biggest of those human constructions—religion—and consequently caused him to replace it with the true "supreme fiction" that is poetry.

4. A Godless Universe: What Does it Look Like?

The influence that "scientific, philosophical, and social change, along with massive world war" had on Stevens was tremendous (Thomas 2). For example, before WWI, "Nietzsche had. . . declared that God was dead and religion had lost its power" which forced poets to face "the brutal reality of large-scale modern warfare at odds with Romantic notions of heroism and honor" (Thomas 2). Darwin's theory of evolution also took hold in the 20th century which partnered along with "Freud's idea that unconscious motives control human behavior" led many writers like Stevens to question life structures and the role of the self in recreating new and improved ones (Thomas 2). Stevens begins to question these life structures in "Sunday Morning." Stevens begins, "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" (1-5). Here, the woman in the poem feels pleasure in lounging around under the sun in her "peignoir" with the taste of coffee in her mouth and the song a cockatoo in the air but soon, the song of the cockatoo is ironically drowned out by the "holy hush of ancient sacrifice." This "holy hush" is of the "procession" of the people on this Sunday morning on their way to discuss that "old catastrophe" of the son of God dying on the cross (Stevens 7-10). The woman feels "the dark/Encroachment of that old catastrophe" and feels "As a calm" that was once within her at the beginning of the poem "darken" (Stevens 6-8). The woman is guilty of not accompanying her people "across wide water" "to silent Palestine" (11-15). Throughout this first stanza, the real and material world that consist of the peignoir, coffee, oranges, and the cockatoo is contrasted by the imaginary, "ancient," "old," "dead," and "dreaming" world of religion. Continuing this opposition between the imaginary and the real, the woman questions what she owes to "the dead" or to Christ when it takes no obvious form in life only in the "silent shadows and in dreams" (Stevens 1-3). Since religion might only be a shadow (imaginary), she questions why she cannot "find in comforts of the sun,/ In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else/ In any balm or beauty of the earth,/ Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?" (Stevens 19-22). Essentially the woman questions why she cannot use the material and worldly things (or the real) to fill what religion claims to do. She then makes two assertions: one, "Divinity must live within herself," and two, the measures "destined for her soul" are those of "Passions of rain," "falling snow," "forest blooms," "wet roads," "autumn nights," "The bough of summer and the winter branch" (Stevens 23-30).

By making these two assertions Stevens is claiming that paired against the construction of religion, real divinity lies within the self and what must be praised is not "the dead" or "blood and sepulcher" but rather the "comforts of the sun." Still, though, it is important to add that although this woman should not spend her time worrying about "the dead" it is still important to discuss "All pleasures [*and*] all pains" (Stevens 28). Even more evident is what continues in the fourth stanza, the woman makes the point that the things found in nature, like the "birds" ease her thoughts on reality—that is, their presence is real and so her believes in nature are too. She questions what paradise consists of—if she does not believe in Heaven or the "haunt of prophecy" but in the here and now—what will be of her ideal paradise if the birds or things in nature are gone (Stevens 49-51)? The woman then compares the "haunt of prophecy" and the "Remote on heaven's hill" (religion) to "April's green" (material world) which will, contrastingly "endure" (Stevens 64-65). Uncovering that religion may never fulfill what the physical (material) world can, the woman makes a final contention—"Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, /Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams/ And our desires" (Stevens

63-65). The woman touches upon the idea of paradise once more. Here she voices her need to find "contentment" or happiness that is "imperishable" or never ends (Stevens 61-62). In response, the woman or the narrator states that "Death is the mother of beauty" and so although happiness may not last forever, the death of some things that cause happiness will breed other things that fill that happiness. Here, what is ideal is for happiness to last forever but what is real is that happiness is transitory and only comes when death births something beautiful. More so, this conclusion—that "Death is the mother of beauty"—redefines the meaning of life in the context of death. It is death that brings meaning to life, it is death that makes the "comforts of the sun" as well as "April's green," "awakened birds," "plums and pears," and all the other things on earth seem beautiful.

Although, believing in the physicality of the world may annul the thought of paradise in Heaven, knowing the truth that "Death is the mother of beauty" should be enough to live life and not fear death. In the final stanza of the poem, the woman hears a voice calling out to her, saying that the tomb of Jesus in Palestine is not surrounded by any "spirits" (Stevens 108). It is simply "the grave of Jesus, where he lay" (Stevens 109). If this is so, then the basic beliefs that form Christianity are not true. The narrator points out that as people of habit with an "old dependency of day and night,/ Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,/ Of that wide water, inescapable" individuals need constructions (like those of religion) to keep the world from "chaos" (Stevens 110-113). But, the narrator states, that there are "deer," "mountains," "wide water," "quails" and so many more natural things around us that can provide us with the comfort and order that we seek. Here, Stevens makes a final claim that religious dogma is simply fiction—it is a human construction that can easily be replaced by the reality and beauty of nature. Essentially, "The world as she experiences it is no longer meaningful in relation to anything which might lie beyond it. The Christian world view has lost its credibility for her because the Word is no longer active as a mediating Presence. A once living faith has died back into history and is no longer recoverable except as myth" (Angyal 32).

A godless universe then for Stevens, is a universe that accepts that organized religion is a delusion and in coming to terms with this, individuals can live in their own versions of "paradise." These varying versions of paradise allude to "[t]he idea of reality as subjective, with no stable objective reality" this, in turn, highlights that "'out there' undermines the idea of god as stable and transcendent, suggesting instead the notion that god is a shifting and relative human construct" (Thomas 8). Stevens highlights the modernist tendencies and "movement away from a Christian world view and a series of attempts to find substitutes for it that would provide men with a proximate security in the temporal world" that religion now cannot provide (Angyal 30). "Sunday Morning" is just one example of the change needed in poetry and in the world. Because human constructions (like those of religion) have shown up as being false, poetry must adapt around these changes.

5. A Godless Universe: Imagination and "Supreme Fiction"

What then is there left to do in a godless universe? According to Stevens and in the context of poetry,

> poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption. . . The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give (Thomas 10).

It is then essential for individuals to be introspective—look within and reveal what can

"support" them. Stevens' other piece, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" is an extension of "Sunday Morning" now that it still showcases religion opposingly. In this case though, rather than pitting religion and poetry against each other the narrator brings the two into dialogue. This poem recounts a dialogue between a man—the advocate for poetry and a "high-toned old Christian woman" who, because of her religious beliefs looks down upon poetry. The man argues that poetry is "the supreme fiction"—using it twofold to describe religion as a "fiction" and then adding that poetry supersedes that fiction. The poet continues to state that in poetry the woman may even be able to "make a nave of it" and "build haunted heaven" (Stevens 2-3). In this case, the poet suggests what poetry can do—by using poetry, the woman can preach as she would in a church (nave) and talk about that "haunted heaven." Since poetry is the "supreme fiction" it can very well provide space for other fictions (religion) and in doing so it is "converted into palms" or a god-like thing (Stevens 4). In coming to this conclusion, the poet states that "we agree in principle" and so there should not be any animosity between the two (the poet and the religious woman) (Stevens 6). Advancing in his argument the poet also claims that although poetry can take shape of "haunted heaven" it may very well take shape out of the church and into "a peristyle" in the world (Stevens 7).

Mockingly, the poet states that in doing so, poetry may "project a masque" or a drama even "Beyond the planets" into heaven itself (Stevens 9). Here Stevens is poking fun at the idea of heaven—as a "supreme fiction" poetry itself becomes powerful enough to reach "Beyond the planets" and have those in heaven indulge in poetry itself. The poet, displaying how limited religion is, states that despite God's promise to forgive all sins, our "bawdiness" may never be purged by "epitaph" on our tombstones (Stevens 9-10). Since individuals indeed cannot be rid of sin they might as well "indulge [in it] at last" and undergo another conversion into their true self (Stevens 10). The question of life after death, of "paradise" discussed in "Sunday Morning" is similar here now that the poet discusses that in death there will be just that—death—and not the eternal life promised by God and his son. The poet realizes that the religious woman and the man are then "where [they] began"—that is, they have arrived at the same conclusion that the poet made in lines before—poetry "is the supreme fiction" (Stevens 13). The poet, having come to this conclusion once again, tries to persuade the woman to "Allow" the "disaffected flagellants" to enjoy the "parade" and not the "procession of the dead" ("Sunday Morning") in life and more importantly in poetry (Stevens 16). In allowing this, individuals despite their "novelties of the sublime," will imagine "Such tink and tank and tun-a-tunk-tunk" and embark in a "jovial hullabaloo" against the pain that "widows" might feel (Stevens 17-22).

Poetry then can create a space for anything the imagination wants to create—in doing so it may even help the "disaffected flagellants" find a version of reality that allows them to be "Proud of such novelties of the sublime" while also be "well-stuffed" and enjoy the physicality of life. Overall, the man is trying to convince the old Christian woman—all the while poking fun at her beliefs—that poetry can do everything and more that religion claims to do. As Doud astutely puts it "God, to Stevens, is a fiction that the human imagination persistently constructs, revises and projects. God is the 'essential poem' at the centre of things" (64). If, God is the "essential poem" then it is no wonder why Stevens' writing usually centers around the idea of God but as the "essential poem" God and religion are indeed fictions, they are one human construction out of the many that could be. In talking about "Sunday Morning" Angyal states that "rather than pay obsequious devotions to a veiled deity" the woman in the poem "celebrates the wonder of human consciousness—the quick and keen awareness of the senses, as she encounters the world around her" (32). It is this same

consciousness that is also celebrated in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman." The poet concludes that poetry provides more for people than religion ever can, and this is mainly because poetry "allows" for the creation and then indulgence of life through the "supreme fiction" that is created through each individual's imagination. As it was discussed in "Of Modern Poetry," poetry can relate to the people (because it is living), it deals with the external "war" of life and builds a "poem of the mind" that "will suffice" and make life pleasurable. The "inward quests" that occur while reading or writing poetry "lead to discoveries of the other within themselves" which may hint to "something larger beyond themselves" something "Beyond the planets" that "may be considered an idea of god" but not God itself (Thomas 1). These discoveries then show that the art of poetry can and should replace the idea of religion. In order for this transformation to occur, there must be an "awareness of the poem as an invention" (Thomas 11).

According to Thomas, Stevens writes, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (11). What sets an individual free to live in pleasure despite the dreary circumstances of the time is to learn that they can create their own fiction available through "the supreme fiction" that is poetry and art. Essentially Steven's aim of creating a "supreme fiction" and the use of imagination enables individuals to think attentively "about concrete things with the aim of developing an affectionate understanding of how good it is to be alive" (Angyal 33).

6. Refocusing the Meaning of Death

As Thomas points out "Without the idea of a God accompanying immortal souls in heaven, the problem in our earthly paradise is how to cope with loss and death" (8). In the context of "Sunday Morning," the narrator concludes that "Death is the mother of beauty" (Stevens 63). It is death that makes life meaningful and "life must be lived with this painful knowledge" (Thomas 8). To be truly liberated from the clutches of religion, individuals sacrifice "the comforting myth of immortality" (Angyal 34). As Stevens states in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Let be be finale of seem" (7). It is death, the death of the woman that should stand-in for the celebration of life—for people to "Call the roller of big cigars. . . and bid him whip" ice cream, for people to "dawdle in such dress" and boys to "Bring flowers" (Stevens 1-6). Death is inevitable, so individuals must let it "be." They must face death for what it is—a culmination of life—and realize that the only thing that truly matters "is the emperor of ice-cream"—the pleasures of life. By facing this truth—that life ends—there is "hope residing in the cycles of regeneration" (Thomas 8). Since, according to Stevens, religion has shown up as a falsehood, what people are left with is a sense of "self-preservation" in which poetry can "endow life with meaning" (Thomas 32). Instead of submitting oneself to penance in life like the "disaffected flagellants" of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" do, individuals should enjoy what life has to offer *despite* the horrors of life. It is "The imagination of the poet" (as well as the people) that "immortalize[s] the fleeting moment of perceptual delight and to transcend it by seeking oblivion through death, leaving the poem behind—the created artifact—as a means of triumphing over death" (Angyal 34). It is the creation of poetry and the participation with poetry that allows art and poetry to be immortal even though people are not.

7. So What?

Overall, Stevens questions the role of religion and art in the Modern world of chaos. There is also a need to find "the need of some imperishable bliss"—a need to believe in some sort of alternative paradise that poetry (and art) offers ("Sunday Morning" 62). It is "Amid history's hor-

rors" in which individuals are able to create their "supreme fiction" or rather their "mind-forged manacles" which allows individuals to "transform [them]selves and [their] world anew into something sustainable" (Thomas 12). It is Stevens' "godless poetry" and replacement of religion for art that represents "the relationship between reality and the imagination" (Hicok 125). Although some critics like Doud state that "All poetry points, however remotely and obscurely, to the gospels of Christianity" Stevens' poetry alludes to religion but does so because to "expel religion from our European civilization. . . you can only do it by means of another system of doctrines" ("supreme fiction") (Hicok 135). If "another system of doctrines" is essential to "expel religion" why is Humanism not the "natural substitute" (Thomas 8)? Stevens states, "the more I see of humanism the less I like it" and it is this journey and the fact that "Poetry and god have always been related . . . because neither results from reason or the rational mind" that leads Stevens to brand poetry as the ultimate substitution for religion (Thomas 9). Angyal labels Stevens as "one man standing alone on shifting ground" which shows the extent to which Stevens was a writer distanced from the reality around him (not a bad thing) (30). Stevens "slowly and deliberately" recreates "his world from the inside out through the imagination" and suggests that others do too (Angyal 30).

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