

Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"

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Few short poems have suffered as much from the enthusiasm of their explicators as Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." The numerous, detailed, and often inaccurate analyses to which the poem has been subjected would give pause to its poet, who once wrote: "Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking." A brief look at some of those who have been writing about Stevens over the past fifteen years serves as an example of what has happened since much of the scholarly groundwork on the poem was completed. More recent devotees, perhaps pressured to come up with something new, have begun reading "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" in a way that Stevens once warned against, namely, as an imaginative construct, instead of the work of an imaginative man describing a real world.

Susan B. Wetson, noting Stevens' fondness of "c" sounds, sees "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" as an essentially comic attack on the tendency of people to sentimentalize or idealize death and change.¹ Ronald Sukenick also appreciates the poet's use of alliteration, but he believes the pleasure the poem gives the reader, like the pleasure the emperor whips up for the people at the funeral, may be seen as a relief from the "fatal commonplace to which we are all reduced."² There is no more to death than what physically appears to be, interprets Sukenick. No soul leaves the body; no reincarnation takes place. The beam of the lamp on the corpse's protruding feet confirms these facts. Consequently, our only resort from death is pleasure. A. Walton Litz's interpretation leaves room for both Wetson's and Sukenick's views. Stevens' comic-grotesque image of the dead woman and her association with ice-cream are "balanced out" in the "matched couplets which end the two stanzas of 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream': ... intense pleasure (life) and intense cold (death)."³

Citing Stevens' comment that "things that have their origin in the imagination or in the emotions (poems) very often have meanings

that differ in nature from the meanings of things that have their origin in reason," John Enck concludes that the subject of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is beyond reason, and rational approaches have made too much of the poem. "Here is no tragedy," he says, referring to the dead woman with the protruding feet, "but a routine happening made a bit grotesque and pathetic." Then, in an apparent contradiction, Enck lists a number of possible, but perhaps rationally improbable, explanations of what the poem is about: "Stevens, it has been suggested, wrote the poem because his daughter liked ice cream, and it does playfully offer the beguiling contradictions which confront Alice in her fanciful travels, if the undercurrents imply more. Indeed, the sheeted corpse could be a girl's. Rolling cigars, a definite step at the time before they were manufactured by machines, requires no strength; indeed, women frequently were employed for it. Making the largest cigars would demand no extra force. The emphasis on muscles twists the logic quaintly. In the kitchen the tempest of energy incongruously whips about cups with their unchildish curds. The staging directs the wenches, not aspiring to the verbal dignity of mourners, to waste time as usual, and such lethargy prevails that flowers should arrive wrapped not in the accustomed green tissue but in the handiest container. (To suggest that death transforms yesterday's news — which proverbially nothing is so dead as — makes a metaphysical point at the expense of decorum.)"

R.P. Blackmur, writing in 1932, says Stevens' poem is about life as well as death. In fact, he says, the two are fused in the poem's most frequently quoted line: "Let be be the finale of seem." Whatever seems to be, no matter how ambiguous, is as real as anything that actually is. The woman in the poem seems to be dead and she is. Things are as they are. The only emperor in life, "the only power worth heeding is the power of the moment, of what is passing, of the flux."⁵ One measure of the extent to which Blackmur's belief in what seems to be may be taken is the number of extreme interpretations that have been attached to the poem since the scholar's views were widely spread in a Penguin critical anthology on Stevens' work. Critics have begun claiming that the emperor of ice cream is no more than an indifferent God. Others believe Stevens was telling us we can't use ice cream to hide from the terror of death. Some, taking off where Ronald Sukenick left off, say we can. They believe the best way to deal with death is to be happy and festive. The pain will soon go away, and we'll all be left with nothing but ice cream. One critic asserts that ice cream is the only absolute good in the world. Nothing bad can be said about it. She

found proof for her opinion in Steven's *Letters*, and she cited Turgenev as an example of one who agreed. Apparently, when the Russian novelist first tasted ice cream, he wished it was a sin. Knowing it wasn't immoral was the only thing that kept him from liking it more. Unfortunately for this critic, the novelist who commented on the morality of ice cream wasn't Turgenev. It was Stendhal.

The interpretation that makes any other seem sensible, however, belongs to Patrick W. Shaw.⁶ Offering a number of comments that he believes "might help in arriving at a reasonable explication," Shaw tells us that a roller is someone who rolls expensive cigars "around between" his fingers like a gangster or someone who displays his status. The cigar is the roller's phallic symbol. Because "concupiscent" refers to sexual desire, says Shaw, and "curds" refers to ice cream, the two terms, when juxtaposed, connote semen. The women in the poem are whores. They "dawdle" before the boys, who are young and naive, and feel they must observe the rituals of courtship by bringing the women roses. Stevens' most famous line in the poem echoes Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech, but the poet, according to Shaw, is talking about life, not a play that presents life as it seems. He concludes his examination of the first stanza with the hypothesis that there is no God, only an emperor of ice cream, that is, "the parody of a ruler, who rolls his suggestive cigar and mixes up perverse concoctions in kitchen cups."

Shaw's interpretation of the poem's second stanza is even better than that of the first. The woman is "one of the prostitutes who has dawdled and who is now dead." But the reader can tell she wasn't very successful at her trade because her dresser only has three knobs on it. Nevertheless, there is beauty even in poverty. On top of the dresser is a cloth with pigeons embroidered on it. This beautiful cloth, which is used to cover the woman when she dies, is too short for the corpse, however. The prostitute's callous feet protrude from underneath it, proving that she's a streetwalker and there's no room under the cloth of beauty for anyone in that profession. The light that shines on her feet is artificial. It's not the light of a real God, only that of an emperor of ice cream.

Although Stevens believed that meanings not intended by the poet could be valid, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" may contain a message to critics who feel like letting themselves go, something Stevens said he did while writing the poem. Read in this light, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" may be interpreted as a plea to let the transforming power of the imagination be still for a change. Let us yield to the

discipline of reality for once and take things for what they are. We'll be better off in the long run if we don't whip up ways to deceive ourselves. Interpreted this way, Stevens' comic sense has all the force of a hot scalpel cutting through ice cream, the emperor of which can be anyone who attempts to cover up reality or make it seem like something other than what it is. And it is the shocking contrast between the emperor in the poem and the cold, protruding, horny feet of the woman that best demonstrates the heat of Stevens' attack on deceiving rituals and artifice. "Let the lamp affix its beam," he orders. And in his *Letters*, he writes, "Let being put an end to appearances."

NOTES

1. *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
2. *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 63.
3. *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 114.
4. *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments* (Carbondale Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), pp. 202-203.
5. "Examples of Wallace Stevens," reprinted in *Wallace Stevens, Penguin Critical Anthologies*, ed. Irvin Ehrenpreis (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), p. 66.
6. *Instructor's Manual: Literature, A College Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 111.

NAAS Triennial Conference 1985

Call for Papers and Workshop Proposals

The 1985 Triennial Conference of the Nordic Association for, American Studies will be held in Bergen. Dates have not been set, but a three day period in the first half of May seems a likely choice.

No decisions have yet been made about the program for the conference. This early notice is an invitation to all members of the NAAS to submit proposals for the consideration of the Conference Committee.

Papers

Any member interested in presenting a paper is urged to submit a brief proposal. The Conference Committee may consider the possibility of having parallel sessions geared to special interests within the Association, so specialized topics as well as more general ones will be of interest.

If you are aware of colleagues who should be asked to present a paper, the Committee would also be interested in receiving such advice.

Workshop

If there is interest among the members in having time for workshops at the conference, this will be considered by the Committee. However, a successful workshop needs careful planning and should be established some time in advance of the conference.

Individuals or groups who are interested in participating in a particular workshop are asked to write to the Conference Committee. You may merely wish to suggest what kind of workshop you would like to take part in or you may have more specific ideas about the organization of a workshop. In either case your views would be of help to the Committee.

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