

Imagination vs.  
reality: "the poems of  
our climate" and "the  
snow man"



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Wallace Stevens is known for his philosophical meditations on the dual nature of existence throughout his poetry. According to Stevens, poetry should not be concerned with either the body or the mind, but rather “ an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals.” It is rather difficult to interlock the two concepts as they stand on completely opposite poles of the human psyche. The affiliation between imagination and reality is what Stevens explores and attempts to define and explain: “ Stevens’ poetry is both surreal (philosophical understanding for the lost) and real (the practical conclusion that Stevens can be just as lost as everyone else” (Zarzicki 12). Through the use of natural imagery and contemplative language in his two poems, “ The Poems of Our Climate” and “ The Snow Man,” the intricate and convoluted dualism of human existence becomes graspable.

The intricate duality of the physical and the metaphysical is portrayed in “ The Poems of Our Climate.” In the first stanza, Stevens describes the physical appearance of the scene through the use of pure and serene words, such as “ brilliant,” “ clear,” “ snowy,” “ white,” “ newly-fallen,” “ cold,” and “ porcelain.” Through this use of diction, Stevens illustrates a world that is beautifully silent and untouched due to its disassociation with human existence. However, this atmosphere is not ideal to him as complete detachment is not desirable: “ Pink and white carnations—one desires so much more than that” (6-7), “ Here the object—a bowl of pink and white carnations—promises an idealization, and just about delivers it, only to then provoke dissatisfaction” (Smith 47). There is both an allure and repulsion to a world that is untouched by humans.

Stevens' choice of diction provides the scene with beauty and purity but also with apathy and distaste, which exemplifies the conflicting and bewildering relationship between imagination and reality. In the second stanza, Stevens displays the impossibility of reality without imagination: "in a world of white, a world of clear water, brilliant-edged, still one would want more, one would need more, more than a world of white and snowy scents" (14-17). Even though the human imagination can create deformities and complications on its own, it is still considered displeasing and unlivable. The phrase "snowy scents" is contradictory as snow does not contain a smell, and the "world of white" is blank with nothing to exhibit. There is no pleasure provided for the human senses in this world, therefore it is not satisfying or true. Stevens further explains the distastefulness of a pure world in the final stanza as he states, "There would still remain the never-resting mind, so that one would want to escape... the imperfect is our paradise" (18-21). Human existence requires constant fluctuation between imagination and reality in order to function. Neither sector can be completely apprehended or understood, they just both need to be present in some form.

Stevens also states, "The imperfect is so hot in us" (24). The presence of the word "hot" directly opposes the cold winter imagery within the first two stanzas of the poem, which further exemplifies the paradox of life: "Given our insatiable desire, the nature of our never-resting minds, and our inability to get the words right, we have only one option: to embrace the imperfect as 'our paradise.'" And once we have embraced the imperfect as our paradise, its bitterness becomes more and more compelling. 'The imperfect is so hot in us' that it becomes a kind of insatiable desire in itself. Getting it wrong,

Stevens offers, is what it means to have a human mind. And the working of the mind provides its own delight" (Skorczewski 103). He concludes the poem with the statement that the imperfect " lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds" (25). Words are derived from the imagination, yet used to describe aspects of reality. Although such words are " flawed," meaning they cannot completely unify imagination and reality, they are still crucial towards functional human existence; therefore reality and imagination must be used concurrently to allow for a desirable life.

While " The Poems of Our Climate" promotes the interweaving of imagination and reality, " The Snow Man" suggests complete detachment from imagination and the active mind. As seen previously in " Poems of Our Climate," Stevens uses natural imagery in " The Snow Man" to describe a pure and serene winter environment: " pine-trees crusted with snow... junipers shagged with ice...spruces rough in the distant glitter" (1-4). He insists that one " must have a mind of winter," a mind free of any subjectivity or warmth the senses: " he accepts and enjoys this bare scene, and there is nothing special in the place of his experience, or in himself for experiencing it there" (Cook 48). The mind is active and always adding, which is what influences human perception: " winter words for wintry matter, as elegant as any decoration, involve our feelings as directly as image can... it involves our minds" (Tindall 23). In order to establish a mind of winter, one must banish the imaginative mind and focus only on the concrete, emotionless aspects of the physical world.

The imagery is dramatically simplified and subdued in the second half of the poem as sensory richness deteriorates and the mind becomes colder: " In <https://assignbuster.com/imagination-vs-reality-the-poems-of-our-climate-and-the-snow-man/>

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" (9-12). Stevens' description of the scene of the poem is austere and subdued, which is necessary towards the establishment of a mind of winter. The final stanza takes a turn on the poem as a whole. Stevens introduces "the nothing," a revelation of nothingness in which winter evokes. In this stanza, "there are two kinds of nothingness—'the nothingness that is' and 'nothing,' which is the absence of something. The greater lack is the latter—the absence of imagination in the man who 'beholds nothing that is not there'" (Oster 159). When one stops creating the world they perceive, the world loses its meaning, which Stevens structurally portrays as the poem ends once the speaker's creative principle of imagination has disappeared. Through the placement of the word "the" before "nothing" and "nothingness," the concept becomes conceptualized, and affirms yet limits the process of decreation: "He (the speaker) has become the snow man, and he knows winter with a mind of winter, knows it in his strictest reality, stripped of all imagination and human feeling. But at that point when he sees the winter scene reduced to absolute fact, as the object not of the mind, but of the perfect perceptual eye that sees 'nothing that is not there,' then the scene has become 'the nothing that is'" (Pack 68). Through this poignant ideology, Stevens untangles the paradoxical jumble of human existence, allowing the reader to better comprehend the dualism of perception.

Stevens' language in "The Snow Man" is demanding as the beginning words of the poem, "One must," forcefully prepare the reader for what must happen. However, Stevens does not intend to advocate anything; he intends

to suggest the reader stop and observe their mind and to try to uncover the genuine satisfaction of the physical world outside of the imagination: “ the only life worth living is the one generated from the imagination, not the scientific, unemotional mode that most people are forced to adopt...this hypothesis can seem ironic. If the reader is the snow man, then appreciation for the natural world will spring forth with tremendous ease” (Zarzicki 19). Stevens shifts between different theories of imagination and reality and their affects on the human psyche, which exemplifies the mercurial nature of existence.

Stevens emphasizes the greater importance of the imagination in this poem, however both poles of the duality still remain, which illustrates the complex inseparability of the physical and metaphysical in daily life. Both “ The Poems of Our Climate” and “ The Snow Man” explore the oscillation between imagination and reality when meditating on human existence. Both poems also do so by presenting a reality barren of humanity, which is portrayed as incomplete and hollow, but also beautiful. No matter how hard one tries to diminish the creative mind, imagination and reality will always be interlaced, which complicates yet beautifies the duality of human perception.