

The reality of imagination

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Poetry is a dichotomy of imagination and reality. It requires metaphors and abstract symbols as representatives of the poet's imagination. These metaphors and symbols are depicted through concrete images in order to correlate with the reality that the reader and poet exist in. According to Roy Harvey Pearce's essay *Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination*, Stevens refers to himself as an "exponent of the imagination" and "As poet, he [Stevens] is...an 'exponent of the imagination'...But, as a human being, he finds that he must hold the imagination to concrete reality" (Pearce 117).

Pearce, along with many other critics, believe that the diverging relationship between an imaginative world and reality is one of Stevens' biggest concerns and struggles in his poetry. This battle between imagination and reality existed for Stevens in poetry as well as in his everyday life. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in March 1937, Stevens wrote, "I have been trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is" (Beckett 117).

This struggle between imagination and reality is extremely apparent in Stevens' poetry, specifically in *Evening Without Angels* and *A Fading of the Sun*, both of which were published in the 1936 volume *Ideas of Order*. Stevens contrasts images of light and dark, sun and night, in *Evening Without Angels* and *A Fading of the Sun* in order to illustrate a dichotomy between imagination and reality as well as truth and individual perception.

While Stevens establishes a strict opposing relationship in the beginnings of these specific poems, by the conclusion of each of the poems he recognizes that both imagination and truth are necessary components of art and life by the uniting imagination and reality as complements of each other, rather than divergent elements. He uses poetry as a medium to address the

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relationship between imagination and truth, and these poems are no exception. In the very beginning of *A Fading of the Sun* Stevens directly calls upon the audience to question the extremity between light and dark, and in turn, the conflict between imagination and reality.

He begins with, “ Who can think of the sun costuming clouds,” which directly asks the audience to imagine (*Fading 1*). The verb “ to think,” while it can also convey an action dealing with factual knowledge, Stevens clearly uses it in this circumstance in an imaginative sense by the sun image he asks the audience to think of. The sun implies bright, openness, and light; therefore, it serves as a symbol for the imagination. With imagination there is room for interpretation and variations among individual imaginations.

The double meaning of the verb “ to think,” the factual versus the imaginative meaning, inherently adds to the struggle Stevens faces regarding imagination and reality when he writes poetry. Furthermore, Stevens establishes an opposing relationship between light and dark throughout the first three stanzas of *A Fading of the Sun*. In the first stanza Stevens calls upon the audience to imagine “ the sun costuming clouds. ” The image of the sun “ costuming,” masking, or covering up the clouds is unrealistic and the reader can only rely on his imagination to picture this image (*Fading 1*).

The sun can never cover up the clouds because of their location in the earth’s atmosphere; they are always in front of the sun. Furthermore, due to their density and chemical makeup the sun’s light will always be muffled when it tries to penetrate even the thinnest cloud. If the audience does go along with Stevens’ image of the sun masking the clouds, they imagine a

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scene in which they can only see the brightness of the sun with no shadows or darkness, just pure light, pure imagination.

However, with this intense sunlight, “ people are shaken” (Fading 2). Here, Stevens comments on the issue of poetry and life only having imagination, completely excluding truth and reality. People are uneasy with too much sunlight and imagination, with no reality to balance it out. In contrast to poetry and life having too much sunlight and imagination, Stevens also negatively remarks upon life and poetry being solely centered on darkness and reality. Darkness implies truth and definiteness because there is only one color with darkness: black.

There is sureness in this color, there is no room for other interpretations, there is just black, just darkness, just reality and truth. Too much darkness causes people to “ cry for help” and makes their bodies “ grow[s] suddenly cold” (Fading 5, 7). People become lifeless and succumb to unhappiness when there is no imagination in their lives. With this opaque darkness “ The tea is bad, bread sad,” ultimately, Stevens implies that imagination is like sustenance for the mind (Fading 8). Food gives energy to the body and is necessary for survival just as imagination is necessary for survival.

Stevens tarnishes tea and bread in order to relate how the body becomes tarnished when it is only surrounded by reality and when humans exists without imagination. Without food “ people die;” therefore, without imagination they cannot live their lives to the fullest (Fading 10). Moreover, Stevens affirms that it is impossible to be happy “ without a book. ” He states that it is a lie “ If joy shall be without a book” (Fading 11). Here, Stevens uses the book as a symbol for art, poetry, and imagination. Life

without art and imagination will be dark and unhappy; it is like a sky without sun.

Imagination needs to be a part of poetry and life, but although this may be true for Stevens in these first stanzas, Stevens eventually settles upon the notion that reality must be a component in poetry and life as well. Stevens searches for a balance between light and dark, imagination and reality, in this poem and in life and he finds that balance in the last stanza. Stevens erases his prior negative outlook on the diverging relationship of imagination and reality by creating an image of the sun and night working together.

The “ pillars of the sun, / Supports of night” is a direct reference to Stevens’ realization of the harmonizing combination of imagination and truth (Fading 16-17). The sun symbolizes imagination while the night represents reality. With these sun pillars supporting the night people live a full life with tea and wine that are good and bread and meat that are sweet. Stevens creates this image of the sun and night transcending their opposing differences in order to establish the idea that imagination and reality are important parts to life and poetry.

When Stevens combines the image of the sun, representing imagination, with the night, symbolizing reality, “ The wine is good. The bread, / ... is sweet” (Fading 18-19). Although Stevens also refers to tea and meat as being edible and good with the unification of imagination of reality, he forces the reader to focus solely on the wine and bread images by placing the wine and bread in the same line of the poem. Stevens’ inclusion of the wine and bread images seems to be a clear religious reference to Jesus Christ in which Jesus offers his body and blood to his disciples in the form of bread and wine.

When Jesus offered these gifts to his disciples his disciples needed faith and imagination to truly believe that these real, tangible items were indeed the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This idea that faith is needed in order to transcend the reality of these items correlates with the relationship between imagination and reality that Stevens addresses throughout this poem. Furthermore, with any religion, there is a necessary balance between faith, imagination, and belief, with reality, certainty, and truth. An individual must believe in his faith of the afterlife but he must also not ignore the reality of his life on earth.

This last stanza supports Lucy Beckett's claim of "Stevens' constant devotion to reality, his belief that the phrase 'the truth of the imagination' has a meaning only with respect to the imagination's relation with reality." Although Stevens' poetry is largely based in his imaginative world, Beckett notes that Stevens realizes his "responsibility" as a poet to balance imagination and reality (Beckett 42). Stevens' even states in his essay 'Effects of Analogy' that when writing poetry The poet is constantly concerned with two theories.

One relates to the imagination as a power within him not so much to destroy reality at will as to put it to his own uses...The second theory relates to the imagination as a power within him to have such insights into reality (Beckett 43). In *A Fading of the Sun* Stevens uses his power as a poet to combine reality with imagination and he faces the same task in *Evening Without Angels*. Stevens, once again, addresses the relationship between imagination and reality in his poem *Evening Without Angels* and immediately calls

attention to the natural separation between imagination and reality in the beginning lines of the poem.

He opens the poem with the question, “ Why seraphim like lutanists arranged / Above the trees? ” directly placing seraphim, or angels, on a separate level from the trees (Evening 1-2). Stevens immediately creates this image of separation between imaginative beings, seraphim, and the trees, which represent the earth and reality. He creates this separation between imagination and reality in this first stanza in order to set up the conflict between the two components throughout the poem, and then, just as he does in *A Fading of the Sun*, concludes the poem with the complementary combination of both imagination and reality.

Furthermore, Stevens directly questions the audience in these opening lines in order to force the audience to wonder why there has to be a separation of imagination and reality in poetry and in life. In other words, Stevens sparks a wondering in the audience in the beginning of the poem and throughout the poem brings the audience on journey to discover the true balance of imagination and reality. Stevens continues to question the dichotomy between imagination and reality by issuing the question in the third stanza, “ Was the sun concoct for angels or for men? (Evening 10). Here, the sun is representative of the imagined world, specifically heaven. Stevens questions whether the imagined world is only reserved for imagined things, like angels, or if men can be a part of the imagined world as well. Later on in the poem, Stevens declares that men, indeed, “ are men of sun;” they are part of the imagined world (Evening 14). However, before Stevens comes to this

realization he wants the audience to think about man's place in the imagined world.

After he questions whether the imagined world is for men or for angels he states, " Sad men made angels of the sun, and of / The moon they made their own attendant ghosts" (Evening 11-12). From this passage, Stevens seems to be affirming his pro-imagination stance. When men only place angels, or imagined things in their imagination, instead of incorporating imagination into their own human reality, they become unhappy. Again, Stevens utilizes the image of the moon in order to symbolize reality; therefore, when men do not have any sun or imagination in their lives, they become ghosts in their reality.

Ghosts are translucent figures without any substance to them, so without imagination men exist in their reality without any substance; they are empty beings. Therefore, in order to have substance in poetry and in life imagination must be included. In a letter that Stevens wrote to Latimer in 1936 he states, " There is a point at which intelligence destroys poetry" (H. Stevens 20). Intelligence, fact, truth, and reality, according to Stevens, obstruct and hinder the imagination that exists in poetry. Stevens, when writing poetry consciously limited reality's influence and focused on the art of imagination.

However, while imagination is obviously important to Stevens, just as he does in *A Fading of the Sun*, he also stresses the importance of a balance between imagination and reality in the last few stanzas of *Evening Without Angels*. He discusses how " The motions of the mind" often times " Desire for rest" (Evening 21, 24). Stevens associates these " motions of the mind" with <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-imagination/>

“ Light” while the need for rest is associated with darkness, clearly implying that the imagination needs to be muffled by darkness, or reality (Evening 20-21).

Here, Stevens clearly establishes his “ devotion to reality” (Beckett 42). But, it is not until the last few lines of the poem that Stevens demonstrates the importance of a balance between imagination and reality. In the last lines of *Evening Without Angels* Stevens creates the image in which imagination becomes truth. Stevens writes, “ Where the voice that is in us makes a true re- / sponse” (Evening 34-35). The voice is a symbol of the poetic voice inside the poet as well as the imaginative voice that lives inside of each individual.

Through his poetry Stevens uses his poetic voice as a tool to unite imagination and reality. Finally, Stevens concludes the poem by creating the juxtaposition of the sun and moon: “ Where the voice that is great within us rises up, / As we stand gazing at the rounded moon” (Evening 36-37). Again Stevens attributes sun-like qualities to the imagination by giving it the motion of rising up. Then, he combines the imaginative world and reality by placing the individual in a dark setting, staring at the moon, which is a symbol for reality.

Stevens connects the imagination to the rising of the sun in order to make the audience aware that the sun and moon, although they are opposites, do indeed complement each other. Everyday the sun rises and then it sets, allowing night to start, indicating reliance upon one another. If the sun does not rise and set the moon will not be seen. Sister M. Bernetta Quinn explains

in her essay, *Metamorphosis* in Wallace Stevens, that Stevens' poetry "deals with the concrete, the particular; philosophy, with the abstract" (Quinn 69).

Throughout his writing, Stevens stresses that imagination and reality are both necessary components of life and poetry. He is able to come to this conclusion by the act of poetry writing, in which he incorporates metaphors and symbols as representatives of his imagination. These metaphors and symbols are grounded in concrete images and reality in order for the audience to be able to understand and relate to Stevens' imagination and create their own imaginative world through his writing.