

## **A Critical Explanation of Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"**

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Wallace Stevens is an American modern poet who was a contemporary of the most popular modernist poets till date, like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Robert Frost. Modern poets and their poetry have always been designated as obscure and difficult to read and interpret. The same debate regarding the difficulty to read and make meaning surrounds Wallace Stevens but that may be said to have only augmented his popularity and the intrigue about his poetry. But as Eliot's famous observation goes, modern poetry must (compulsorily) be difficult because the modern society itself is full of variety and complexity which acts on the refined sensibility of the poet and modern poetry, while reflecting the various complexities of modern society and man, must naturally become complex. Wallace Stevens, thus, writing in the modernist mode and ethos, produced poetry that evokes discussion on the complexities of meaning making, philosophy, reality/illusion/disillusion, human life and death. The poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" belongs to Stevens' first collection called *Harmonium* (1923). Stevens said that this poem was his favourite among his other poems because it wears a deliberately commonplace costume but still seems to him to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry (qtd. in Lehman and Brehm 249).

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is one of the most ambiguous, enigmatic and intriguing poems of Wallace Stevens. At the outset, the very title of the poem appears as ambiguous and enigmatic. What does the phrase 'the emperor of ice-cream' mean or refer to? Despite the fact that the very idea of 'meaning' or meaning-making is considered an impossibility in postmodernist thought, which also leads to ambiguity and plurality of meaning or interpretation. The title may suggest a reference to an emperor who owns an empire of ice-cream and what are the implications of this kind of emperorship or empire. But it may also suggest, metaphorically, obscurely, abstractly and vaguely, an emperor made of or having an orientation for ice-cream where ice-cream metaphorically stands for more things than merely a popular desert. In this sense, the ambiguous grammar usage amounts to a complex metaphor like that of Stevens' another very popular poem from the same collection, "The Snow Man", the first line of which contains the phrase "a mind of winter". But the most accepted 'meaning' of the title "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is the suggestion of the metaphoric and multilayered 'Ice-Cream' as the sole 'Emperor', that is, "the only viable ruling principle of life is what ice cream represents" (Burns 74) metaphorically with multiple

connotations. This analysis of the poem's title shows how modern/postmodern poetry is deliberately ambiguous / obscure and therefore allows multiple interpretations.

The present poem has two parts which are integrally related to one another through the metaphor of ice-cream. These two parts may be said to portray two absolutely opposite scenes which are also complementary to one another, suggesting life and death as two sides of the same coin; that these two, despite being diametrically opposite to one another, are inextricably related, co-existing experiences and make up the whole of human life and a wholesome experience of life. The poem juxtaposes two somewhat bizarre scenes, presented in the form of imperative statements by the narrator (Burns 73). The narrator commands/bids someone (possibly his listener/listeners) to call the one who rolls big cigars, he who is a 'muscular' man and therefore capable of whipping up 'concupiscent' (full of sexual desire/lustful) curds in kitchen cups. He also bids to let the 'wenches' (two possible meanings of the word can be referred to: girl/woman and prostitute) "dawdle", that is, to move very slowly and idly taking their own sweet time. The listener is also asked to allow the wenches to wear their usual/regular wear/dresses (that is, nothing special is required to be done, they can be their usual selves) and let the boys bring flowers wrapped in last month's newspaper. Basically, the speaker asks the listener to allow the boys and wenches to do as they please. "The imagery of the first stanza suggests something of the voluptuousness of existence . . ." (Burns 73). This means that the first stanza has suggestions of sexuality/physical desire/lustfulness (references like 'muscular', 'concupiscent', the connotation of prostitution by 'wenches'). The lust does not only refer to sexual desire but the lustfulness for a dessert like ice-cream and the pleasure and indulgence that it might stand for.

This also means that the first stanza has metaphorical suggestions of life and desire liveliness, exuberance, youthfulness /freshness, also probably beauty through references to flowers, young boys and girls and all that is represented by the ice-cream. The refrain or the recurring line in the poem is "The only Emperor is the Emperor the of Ice-Cream" and in the context of the first part of the poem, this line refers to the idea mentioned earlier, that the only viable, dominant principle of human life is what the ice cream stands for metaphorically, "enjoyment, sustenance" (Burns 74). But amidst the metaphorical suggestion of energy / strength (muscular and 'masculine'), life, lust, freshness/fragrance/romance (symbolised by flowers), there is a paradoxical blending of the ideas of the old (old newspaper, for example), the sluggish (dawdling), the usual / mundane and most importantly, the idea of death. The serving of ice-cream or desserts is part of traditional occasions in many cultures which Stevens had come across (Allen). It may be interpreted that the flowers are being brought for

the funeral, the coldness of the ice-cream anticipating the ‘cold’ and ‘dumb’ dead lady in the second part of the poem. This is quite opposed to the vitality and youthful romance and dalliance that the young boys and girls and the flowers represent. The romantic visions of life, especially those associated with youth and inexperience (thus ‘innocence’, to some extent) is shadowed by the dawning of ‘reality’ upon romantic illusion as emblemized by the scene of death of an apparently elderly woman. Even the ‘experience’ that this woman may symbolize, is contrasted to ‘innocence’ of youth. Thus youth/age, innocence/experience, reality/romantic illusion, appearance/reality are some of the binaries that are also paradoxically blended in the symbolic pattern of the poem. The passage of time, the fleeting and temporary nature of life, are also emphasized by some of the symbols in the poem. The old newspaper (wrapping fresh flowers) and the dilapidated, unrepaired dresser with three lost knobs in the room of the dead woman and even the fleeting moments right between the activities/hustle-bustle of the kitchen to the calm dumbness of the deceased’s room and the symbolic understanding of the arc of human life from youth to ageing, suggests a movement/lapse of time.

The line “Let be be the finale of seem” is as ambiguous as it is significant. What could be surmised is that the speaker commands that “be” or ‘what is’ or the ‘reality’ should prevail over the “seem”, that is, the ‘appearance’, the ‘illusory’, the ‘romantic’ and the ‘unreal’/ ‘what is not’. Reality should be the finale or the ultimate state of human existence. This makes reality versus appearance a major theme of the poem. But what is the ‘reality’ is an ambiguous question. Whether reality is living or death or both? Or is reality a subjective matter, making each one’s reality different? The postmodern thought believes there is no one ultimate reality. The line may also seem to suggest that the finale of “seem”, that is the youthful illusions and romanticism, is the stark ‘reality’ of Death or even do away with any kind of illusions associated with death. Judith Christine Brown thinks that the line suggests that only in death does seeming end, as in life, there is only seeming (or appearances) because people filter the world through the distortions of imagination and language (qtd. in Allen). Eleanor Cook, a critic, points out that there could be possible connections between Stevens’ poem and Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* where the hero deals with issues of life, death and being etc. (Allen)

Moreover, the kind of celebratory ambience of the kitchen and the deadness of the ambience of death are juxtaposed and it raises the question if this amounts to a celebration of death? Or is the kitchen party oblivious of the harsh truth of life and the end of all its exuberance and possibilities? Is this energy/desire/oblivion about the melancholy of death is

because of the apparent youthfulness of the kitchen party and consequently being engrossed in a pleasingly romantic vision of life or is it because the kitchen party has no emotional connection with the dead lady? Or is it the perceiver/narrator who is the bridge between these two scenarios and stands for how mutually inclusive and complimentary the two aspects of human life, life and death, are. Burns states:

The two scenes can be thought of as taking place in adjacent rooms of the same house . . . Together, the scenes show us life going on in all its animation right beside the presence of death. The conclusion Stevens draws from this juxtaposition ends both stanzas and gives the poem its title “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream”.  
(74)

The second part of the poem deals more profoundly with the scene of death and also expands the metaphorical significance of ‘ice-cream’ as the only emperor. The room, possibly next to the kitchen, shows the corpse of the dead lady lying. But the stanza begins with another of the narrator’s command to take out from the “dresser of deal” (which lacks three glass knobs) a sheet on which the dead lady had “once” (also suggests lapse of time) embroidered figures of birds and to cover the face of the corpse with this sheet. The ‘dresser of deal’ refers to a dresser made of cheap pine (or fir). The unattended, unrepaired and dilapidated/worn out cheap dresser (with the missing glass knobs) suggests the socio-economic condition of the dead lady, the lapse of time and the worn out condition that such a time lapse and use brings about. To some extent, this also symbolizes the condition of the dead owner of the cheap dresser who is probably a worn out lady as her horny feet may suggest and also, her life has worn out now that she is dead, all the hopes, actions, accomplishments and struggles of her lived life may be seen as worn out/lost/absent (like the knobs), leaving a sense of incompleteness to life brought about by the end of life (or death), like the missing knobs make the cheap dresser incomplete. The speaker says that if the sheet is not wide enough to cover the entire length of the corpse and the dead lady’s “horny feet protrude” (“horny” means callused or hardened skin), then these horny feet only show how “cold” and “dumb” (silent) she is. The use of ‘she’ gives the corpse a human identity and connotes life and vitality (which was once present when she lived) while the reference to cold, dumb, horny protruding feet somewhat suggest deadness, lack of life/vitality, a dead and dysfunctional part of the human who is now an invalid; the choice of words in the phrase also help suggest a non-human identity, rather suggesting a more animal one, and this has perhaps made some to interpret these as symbolic suggestions of a lower social class (working class) that the woman may have belonged to. The use of ‘cold’ and ‘dumb’ suggest the chilly lifelessness associated

with death. This evocation of the cold and chilly may also be linked to the central metaphor of the ice cream. In the context of the second stanza, the metaphor of ice-cream stands for the cold dead body as well as the chilly feeling that death brings. Ice-cream if allowed to rest in normal temperatures melts away easily. In this sense the ice cream metaphor stands for the ephemerality or transience of life (life as described in the first stanza) which easily melts/wears away and lost in death. Thus the transience of life makes it an imperative to seize the day (*Carpe-diem*) and live life to the fullest. Allen states:

By linking the chill of death with a frozen dessert, Stevens seems to imply that death and the sensuous pleasures of life have something in common: detachment or isolation, perhaps. The dead woman is insensible to—"cold" toward—the lively goings-on in the kitchen, and those dawdling girls don't seem very concerned with her either.

The embroidered birds ("fantails") on the sheet may symbolically suggest life and freedom but also the arrest of life (as in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn") as the birds are only a form of art arrested in the creative medium or the art piece of the embroidered sheet which now acts as a shroud/pall. The beauty of the art piece has now got associated with death, at least trying to cover the horrific face of death and of the dead. It is ironic how once her piece of creativity (vitality) now serving as her shroud and also denoting the end of a creative life. The next line "Let the lamp affix its beam" is another of the speaker's commands which primarily means that he probably bids someone to fix the lamp in the room of the dead woman to illumine the dark room so that the corpse is visible and this would make paying tribute easier or would be a respectful gesture towards the dead. But this metaphorically suggests that scrapping all illusion of life, the light of reality/disillusion/experience about life's end dawns upon the perceiver who can see the reality of life, which is death, more clearly and profoundly. The lamp affixing its beam may also metaphorically suggest that man's life is a 'flickering' (like the flickering of a lamp) between life and death, with all its uncertainties. But as death comes as the end of life, it "affixes" the flickering condition. This line reminds the reader of Macbeth's magnificent soliloquy in Act 5 Scene 5 of the play *Macbeth* where Macbeth, after murdering King Duncan, realizes and philosophises that life is like a brief candle that can get extinguished any moment, also alluding "to the fleeting nature of existence" (Burns 73) and that life is a tale told by an idiot, thus suggesting a meaninglessness of life. Burns suggests that Stevens' poem is closely related to Robert Frost's poem "Out, Out---" which is an allusion to Macbeth's soliloquy and Frost's poem also deals with the absurdity of life and the question of man's attitude to death. In relation to

the second stanza of Stevens' poem, the last line of the poem, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" may be thought to suggest that the viable ruling principle of life or the ultimate reality of life is Death which is supreme, the emperor. This idea may be seen in stark opposition to this line's interpretation in the context of the first stanza. The melting away of life denoted by the ice-cream and hence the necessity to live life each moment may also be considered the dominant principle of life which makes the ice-cream the emperor, the supreme ruler of human life.

Thus, finally it may be concluded that life and death are both part of the same process and both must be accepted with the same gusto, neither is the reality individually but together both aspects represent the reality of life. Thus both, the vitality of the kitchen party and the chilly deadness of the woman, come together to make a complete whole. Stevens' thought in this context, as explained by Burns, is very important:

On its second appearance, after the presentation of the corpse, it may also suggest something about the transience of life, for the ice cream will inevitably melt. The implication seems clear: one must seize the moment and live life to its fullest, before it vanishes. Stevens almost jokingly—and obliquely—presents a powerful and rather hedonistic idea: that life's proper object is enjoyment, not death. Death may be inevitable, but it should not cast a pall on the vitality of the living moment. The living, as in Frost's much sterner poem, must get on with their lives. (Burns 74)

This idea is more inclined towards a postmodern celebration of life in all its dimensions and this quality makes Wallace Stevens extremely relevant and popular even today.

### References

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