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Wallace Stevens The Dramatist :  
Reality and Imagination

By

Dr. Afaf ( Effat ) Jamil Khogeer

Ph.D.Associate Professor of English

Faculty of Social Sciences

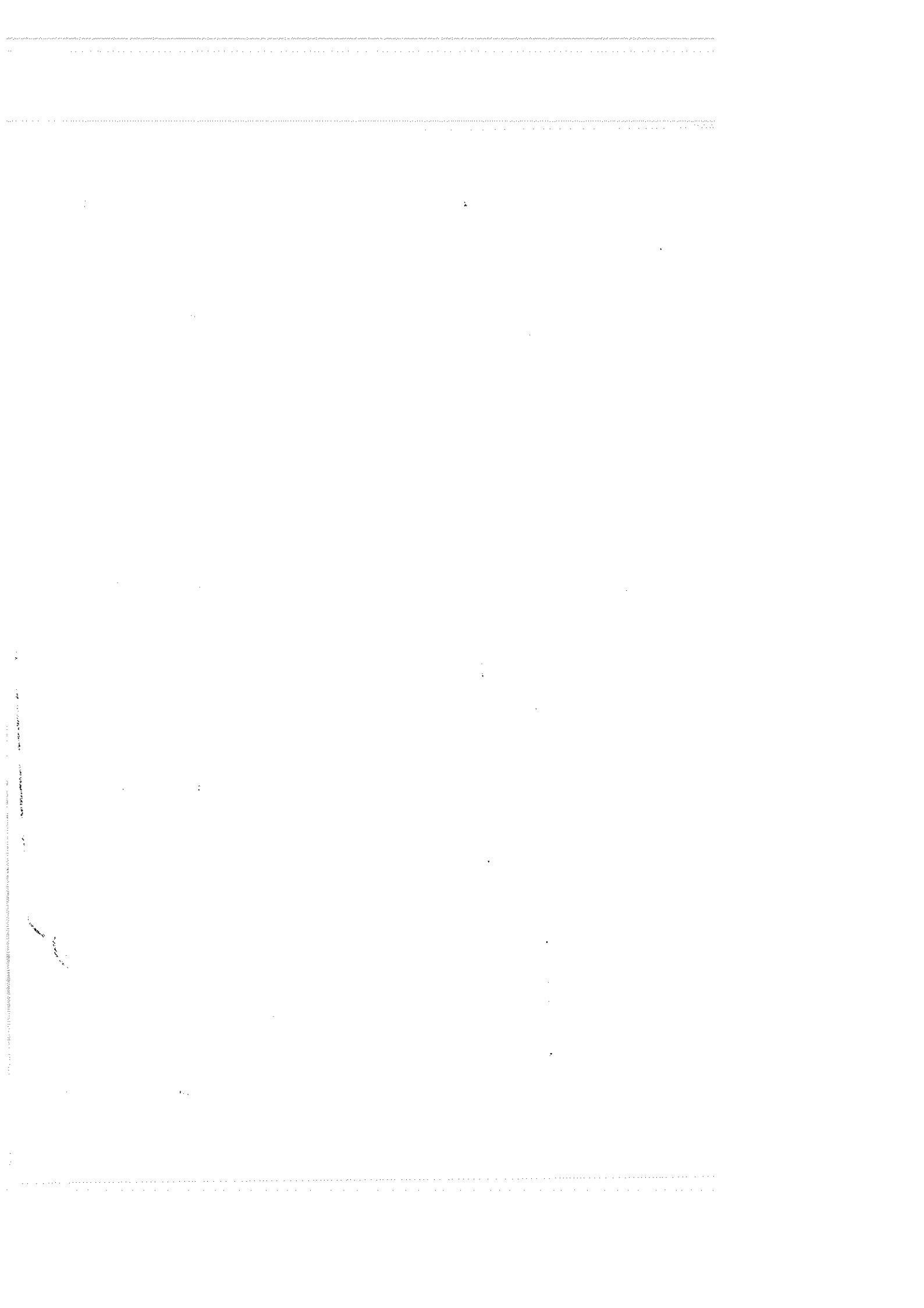
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## ABSTRACT

Although some critics have labelled him as 'the unprofessional poet,' Wallace Stevens was undoubtedly one of the great poets of America.

His poetry is philosophical, yet he deals with his ideas in a concrete manner. One of the dominant subjects in his poetry is the confrontation between reality and imagination where the latter, as Stevens says, "enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos."

Wallace Stevens also wrote three experimental one-act plays in 1915-1917, but his published plays were coldly received by most of his critics. In his search for identity, he set out to tackle drama perhaps because the medium of the drama lends itself conveniently to an impersonality he was to look for throughout his poetic career.

This paper is an attempt to analyse *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise* - an experiment in the use of the dramatic medium in which Stevens tried - as early as 1916 to come to grips with the central question of the relationship between imagination and reality.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

### المستخلص العربي

بالرغم من أن بعض النقاد اطلقوا على " والاس ستيفنز" لقب الشاعر "غير المتمكن" إلا انه قطعاً احد اشهر الشعراء في امريكا حيث كان شعره فلسفياً ولكنه يعرض أفكاره المحسوسة. وقد كان احد أهم المواضيع التي تناولها في أشعاره هو مواجهة الواقع بالخيال، حيث كما يقول ستيفنز "يمنحنا الخيال القدرة على استيعاب الطبيعي وغير الطبيعي وفهم التضارب في الفوضى".

لقد كتب ستيفنز أيضاً ثلاث مسرحيات تجريبية ذات فصل واحد ما بين عامي ١٩١٥-١٩١٧م ، ولكن مسرحياته المنشورة لم تحظى بالترحيب الحار من النقاد.

في بحثه عن هويته لجأ ستيفنز الى الفن المسرحي ربما لكون المسرحية وسيلة مناسبة للتعبير عن الشخصية التي دأب يبحث عنها خلال حياته العملية كشاعر .

هذا البحث محاولة لدراسة مسرحية ( ثلاثة مسافرون يرقبون شروق الشمس) ، والتي كانت تجربة ستيفنز استخدام الإسلوب المسرحي للوصول إلى النقطة الرئيسية في العلاقة ما بين الخيال والواقع.

د. عفاف (عفت) جميل خوقير

استاذ مشارك -الأدب الإنجليزي

جامعة أم القرى - مكة المكرمة

Afaf (Effat) Jamil Khogeer, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English Literature  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Umm Al-Qura University  
Holy Makkah.

## **Wallace Stevens the Dramatist:**

### **Reality and Imagination**

Although some critics labelled him ‘the unprofessional poet,’ Wallace Stevens was undoubtedly one of the great American poets. By the end of World War II, “he had produced a body of verse that distinguished him as one of the six or seven major poets writing in English in the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> Stevens spent most of his adult life as an executive of an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. Throughout this career, he composed poetry mostly at weekends and at nights. In 1955, Stevens received the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

Stevens’s poetry is philosophical, yet he does not deal with ideas in an abstract manner, but rather represents them with concrete objects, settings, and characters. A recurring subject of his poetry is the role of the imagination in bringing order to a reality that is essentially chaotic. Stevens wrote in his book of

essays, The Necessary Angel (1945) "...the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos".<sup>ii</sup>

Stevens says in "Adagia" that "reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor", and that the poetic imagination's power of metaphor makes it "the necessary angel of earth" and thus, the "typically angelic act is to create order."<sup>iii</sup>

So, Stevens' dualism between reality and the imagination, and between things as they really are, as we perceive them and then transform them, is a dominant subject echoing through his writing by way of other oppositions, one idea being raised apparently only to be challenged and tested by another.

Wallace Stevens also wrote three experimental one-act plays between 1915 and 1917. However, being a modern poet does not necessarily mean being a great dramatist. His two published plays were coldly received by most of his critics, some dismissing them as of no dramatic value, others thinking that their real worth lay in ".....the writing of these dramas convinced Stevens that his talent is philosophical, expository and narrative rather than dramatic."<sup>iv</sup> The lack of overt action, on the one hand,

and the attempt to create a symbolic action, on the other, led to the play's being labelled as allegories of the type found in symbolist or oriental drama. Riddel writes of Three Travellers, for instance, that "Symons was many years afterward to call it an "allegory", which is perhaps close enough to indicate its relation to symbolist drama.<sup>v</sup> John J. Enk considers that:

*His two one-act plays ... belong to that period when English poets first became aware (by reports, one judges) of Noh and European experiments like Igitur or, perhaps, merely Maeterlinck. They failed to transpose oriental stage conventions and did not heed Mallarm's note "ce conte s'adresse a l'intelligence du lecteur qui met les choses en scene, elle meme." W. B. Yeats early plays, with their characters never quite humanly conscious and speaking a language elusive to a point of inanity, set the pattern."<sup>vi</sup>*

We are told that the two plays were failures on the stage. The first-night audience of the Province town plays' production of Three Travellers (1920) "must certainly have puzzled over a performance which is less dramatic than Dylan Thomas reading his own poems."<sup>vii</sup> Theatre critics ignored the play. The earlier production of Carlos Among the Candles (New York, 1917) was commented

on by the New York Times drama critic, as a “baffling monologue.....intended neither for the stage nor for the library.”<sup>viii</sup>

In his search for identity, the young Stevens set out to write plays perhaps because the medium of the drama lends itself conveniently to an impersonality he was to seek throughout his poetic career. While the protagonist in the lyrical context of his poems remains a voice,<sup>ix</sup> Stevens experiments in the play with the use of personae and spectacle. In a letter to Miss Monroe about Three Travellers, he wanted “to have the play a play and not merely a poem, if possible.”<sup>x</sup> It is my contention that, in writing the plays, Stevens was deliberately exploiting the potentialities of a different medium to develop some of his central ideas about poetry.

This paper attempts to study Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise as an experiment in the use of the dramatic medium in which Stevens tries, as early as 1916, to come to grips with the central question of the relationship between imagination and reality. In Three Travellers, he presents a symbolic action based on the dialectic of statement and dramatisation of themes. The plot is developed in three stages, one leading to another: first, the



themes are stated and illustrated through the varying attitudes of three Chinese (this section corresponding to the 'formal exposition'); secondly, the central theme is realised in an actual poem (the son of the First Chinese); finally, the themes are dramatised and recapitulated in overt violent action. This last stage corresponds to the traditional denouement, since the tension of conflicting attitudes is resolved, as a result of the violent action, into a recognition of the true nature of poetry. In such a plot, the characters do not need to be individualised; they remain personae (not voices), on whose consciousness is projected the internal action.

The use of stage effects and elements of spectacle are central to the representation of the action as well as to conveying the "meaning" of the piece. Dialogue and detailed stage directions are equally important. The setting and concrete objects of visual appeal (the porcelain bottle, the rising sun, the baskets, the colours of the Chinese's costumes, and finally the body of the lover hanging from a tree) translate the abstract theme and sentiment into the concrete language of the theatre. Musical effects such as the subdued music played by the First Chinese and the Negro's drum-

beating shows an attempt to translate Steven' favourite symbolism of 'much' into immediate stage effects.

In the initial stage directions, Stevens provides a summary exposition, in terms of spectacle, of the themes to be both stated and dramatised. In expectation of sunrise, the Pennsylvania forest is nature, reality in all its physical and tangible manifestations, "things as they are," before their transformation on the blue guitar. The Negro's lantern introduces the idea of the light of the imagination. As the limb of a tree creaks, the unseen body of the suicidal lover imposes its presence on the scene, and prepares for the final violent action, introducing the theme of "the invasion of humanity" central to the concept of the poetry being dramatised, here.

The summary exposition sets the tone for the whole action. We are now prepared for a dialectical statement of the theme. The First Chinese's statement:

All you need  
To find poetry  
Is to look for it with a lantern

is robbed of its finality by the counter statement of the Third

Chinese:

I could find it without,  
On an August Night,  
If I saw no more  
Then the dew on the barns.

Both, the statement and the counter-statement, establish reality the only source of poetry, while questions are raised by the bold reply of the Third Chinese about his role of the imagination.

In illustrating this dialectic, the porcelain water bottle represents the pivotal symbol. The bottle is taken by the Negro from one of the baskets, while the Chinese are taking their "red, blue and green" costumes. As the Chinese put on their costumes, the argument centres on the motif of water which, in turn, evokes the argument about the porcelain water bottle. Water is dealt with on both the literal and metaphorical levels. The desire of the First Chinese to drink and his ability to substitute a watermelon for water to quench his thirst established his attitude as that of a realist, unwilling to charge the object with imaginative meaning. The attitudes of The Second and Third Chinese are distinguished through metaphorical interpretations of water. "Dew on the barns" is enough to carry poetic meaning for the Third Chinese. The Second Chinese, "a man of sense and sympathy," correlates dew,

in a sustained series of associations, to a kind of poetry which does not have its roots in reality:

Dew in water to seen,  
Not water to drink:  
We have forgotten water to drink.

As the theoretician, he perceives the meaning of the dramatic metaphor.

The Third Chinese, who occupies an intermediate position between the realist and the theoretician, attempts to establish the relationship between the metaphorical meaning of water and the porcelain bottle, and tangible objects on stage. Significantly, he places the bottle in the centre of the stage while observing that:

It fetches its own water.

In this way the bottle, like the jar in Tennessee, imposes order on the flux of reality. Thus, the link between the symbol of water and that of the bottle is established, and the two symbols combine, in the ensuing argument between the Chinese, to provide an exposition of the central theme.

The symbol of the porcelain water bottle serves to contrast two modes of poetic experience. The first is associated with the court and implies a traditional concept of the nature of poetry. The

second is poetry in which humanity, "with its suffering and pity", has abolished the artificial seclusion of both porcelain (reality) and sunrise (imagination). Poetry can proceed from neither of these sanctuaries, because neither flows from the marriage of imagination and reality.

Such seclusion knows beauty.  
As the court knew it.

The court, with its "windless pavilions," found beauty in a poetic mode imposed on reality, not derived from it:

And gazed on chosen mornings,  
As it gazed on chosen porcelain.

The Second Chinese contrasts the court conception of poetry with a poetry in which the poetic imagination is brought to bear on a vital, not a static world:

But when the sun shines on earth,  
In reality  
It does not shine on a thing that remains  
What it was yesterday.

Fuchs maintains that Stevens'

*... so often has in mind an opposition between his way and what he considers generically as the traditional ... . Engaged in a labour of*

poetic experience. In the second painting, the Chinese appear as “warriors”; the reflection of the painted figures is somewhat modified by the light of the candle. In this case, the candle would tremble in the hermit’s hand as it starts to merge into the painted figures and lose its independence or seclusion. In the third painting neither the candle nor the painted figures can be distinguished from each other. The figures are dead men, representing both an extreme aspect of reality, and objects capable of evoking the emotion of sorrow. In this last case, even the Emperor, the patron of court poetry, can experience the poetic moment created as the imagination arrests the figures on the bottle:

He would forget the porcelain  
For the figures painted on it.

The porcelain becomes the figures painted on it as the sea in “The Idea of Order at Key West” becomes the girl’s song.

.....And when she sang, the sea  
Whatever self it had, becomes the self  
That was her song.....

The formal exposition ends with a recapitulation of the themes in terms of an internal conflict of attitudes within the mind of the Third Chinese. He still seems to advocate the principle of

*reconstruction, he started from scratch making no a priori assumptions about the order of the universe.<sup>xi</sup>*

The term “the invasion of humanity” comes into sharper focus as we are told that the beautiful does not lie in the “chosen mornings” and the “chosen porcelain” of the court, but in the “flawed jars,” “the weak colours,” and “the contorted glass.” It is a concept based on reality as represented even in its most painful manifestations. The beautiful is to encompass all the realities of the world.

A future step in the dialectic of the exposition is represented in an illustration of the themes introduced so far. The Second Chinese proposes three modes of poetic expression, explained with reference to the paintings on the bottle. In the first, the assumption is made that the three Chinese are painted “as we sit here,” while the hermit, equivalent to the poet or the artist, is only “holding this candle to us.”<sup>xii</sup> Both the figures and the lantern are isolated; reality has not yet been transformed onto the blue guitar of the imagination. The outcome is only “wonder”, because neither isolated reality nor isolated imagination can result in a true

seclusion, declaring that “the candle” may “shine for the beauty of shining.” He dislikes “the invasion,” and yearns for the traditional “windless” pavilions of the court. Yet this, his opening attitude, seems to be changing (or at least questioned). The course of the argument makes him begin to realise the nature of the beautiful and the relation between the self and the world:

And yet it may be true  
That nothing is beautiful  
Except with reference to ourselves,  
Nor ugly  
Nor high (pointing to the sky)  
Nor low

Not only does the Third Chinese undergo a change of attitude during the course of the exposition, but the First Chinese also starts to cast aside the role of the ardent realist to assume, in the second phase of the action, the role of singer or poet. The Second Chinese, however, remains the commentator and theoretical whose illustrations help to focus the argument. Thus ‘change’, the basic element of drama, is used to mark the end of the exposition and to launch the dramatisation of the imagination into action.

The song of the First Chinese  
and the “ballad” of Anna form the  
first phase of this dramatisation. In



the song of "Mistress and Maid" the visual and auditory possibilities of the stage combine to prepare the audience to experience a poem (not simply a thematic discourse on the nature of poetry) in which the conjunction of imagination and reality has already taken place. We hear the subdued tune on the musical instrument which, like the blue guitar, is Stevens' metaphor for the fictive imagination. Simultaneously "the sky shows the first signs of morning" partly fulfilling the initial expectation of sunrise.

Like the story of Anna and her lover, the song centres on a romantic experience. It contrasts, in the internal monologues of the mistress and her maid, two modes of love. The first is associated with dead objects, "the white stones near my door". The second is associated with an object to which a certain sentiment is attached and therefore imaginatively realised - "the green gown I

wore". The mistress apparently belongs to the court circle consequently she is incapable of love or sympathetic understanding of reality; the whiteness of the stones near her door denote the death of her love, explicitly expressed in her stammering.

And I - I am tired of him.

The maid's clandestine love for the same man is the "invasion of humanity", her love is earthly and of the world of reality. The departed lover's thoughts will centre on the green gown she wore while he was saying goodbye to her mistress. The man is the young poet who, in his thoughts, must discard the mistress (tradition) for her main (reality).

As a foreshadowing of the Anna story, the song of 'Mistress and Maid' prepared the audience, as well as the characters on stage, to accept the 'Anna action' on a poetic level. It is viewed, therefore, both as poetry and reality. Structurally the Anna story is introduced first as a 'ballad' so as to emphasise its poetic quality, keeping it in tune with the whole argument of the play. To use Riddel's phrase, the ballad becomes "a dramatisation of the imagination in the action".<sup>xiii</sup>

Anna becomes a figure in another song sung by the First Chinese where she is explicitly associated with the porcelain bottle.

There are as many points of view  
From which to regard her  
as there are sides to a round bottle.

This remark recapitulates the observation of the Third Chinese that “the beautiful stands in relation to the self” and establishes Anna as the subject of a poem in which death, an extreme manifestation of reality is an aesthetic inclusion based on the “invasion of humanity”.

Therefore my song should go  
Of the colour of blood.

In the ‘ballad’ the lover features as a ‘Sweaty tragedian’ and Anna as ‘poor’. The ballad not only parallels the song of ‘Mistress and Maid’ but also dramatically comments on it in terms of the central theme. Its function is to relate the song to the scheme of symbols in the play and to illuminate the nature of the imaginative experience already realised in the song. In the ballad the First Chinese is as important a figure as Anna and her suicidal lover. He explicitly assumes the role of poet and commentator, marking a change in his

initial attitude with the change in the progress of the plot from argument to dramatisation. His 'ballad' turns out to be a commentary on a ballad rather than an impersonal presentation of the ballad itself. Consequently, the poetic presentation of Anna's story is tied in with the central symbols of the play, i.e. the porcelain bottle, the candle, the emperor, the hermit and even the setting itself. As a consequence, the ensuing overt action is subdued; it remains portrayed in terms of the central argument.

The suspense, carefully manipulated by the creaking limb interrupting the argument throughout the play, is fulfilled by Anna's actual appearance on stage and the revealing of the lover's body. The body and the figure of Anna "sitting half stupefied under the tree" confront the audience as well as the three Chinese, with the violence of "things as they are"; a violence which seems to overwhelm the imagination and which we were prepared to accept on the aesthetic level of the 'ballad'. Consequently, a pseudo-reversal of the symbolic action takes place as the Chinese discover the imagination's inadequacy to encompass reality in all its roundness. The poem, as in Crispin's experience, comes into serious danger of being superseded by the plum. The effect is a

return on the part of the First Chinese to his initial demand for real water from the spring and an affirmation on the part of the Third Chinese of the “seclusion and porcelain” and the “seclusion of sunrise”. The frustration of imagination is expressed through a collapse of the symbolism of spectacle which has so far functioned as central to the argument.

The second Chinese snuffs out the candle  
The First Chinese puts out the lanterns ...  
When the First Chinese sees the girl, the instrument  
slips away from his hand and falls noisily to the ground.....

Stevens seems to be anticipating a theme which he later deals with in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” -

I cannot bring the world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can.  
I sing a hero's head, large eye  
And bearded bronze, but not a man  
Although I patch him as I can.

The resolution (or denouncement) comes as a result of realising the limitations of imagination in the overwhelming presence of reality. Left alone on the stage, the Third Chinese recognises, in the death of the lover, a manifestation of the eternal process of death and coming-to-be of reality itself. The expectation of sunrise is fulfilled almost simultaneously with the release of suspense about the creaking tree, so that the meaning of

the opening statements in the play is modified by the violence at the end and comes to encompass a more complex relationship between the symbols of action. As the sun rises, it is expected to shine on a world of flux -

And find a new thing (*indicating the body*)  
Painted on this porcelain (*indicating the trees*)  
But not on this (*indicating the bottle*) (my italics)

To summarise, the Third Chinese asserts the relationship between imagination and reality while establishing the shifting relationship of the self with a reality in flux. The resolution is comic because, through a larger dialectic of statement and incident, Stevens arrives at the happy ending of establishing a kind of aesthetic. As Riddel maintains -

*The impressionistic conclusion - a Negro both responding to an ordering nature on his drum - evokes the presence of the subjective in any sense of reality.<sup>xiv</sup>*

This aesthetic, however, is reached through an imitation of an action rendered dramatically through change both in the attitudes of characters and in the total argument of the play. If change,

visual and auditory effects of stage presentation, are basic principles of drama, Three Travellers succeeds in formulating aspects of Stevens' thought in the language proper to the medium.

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#### End Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Ronald Gottesman, ed. The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. II (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), p.1147
- <sup>ii</sup> James E. Miller, ed. The United States in Literature (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1985), p.438
- <sup>iii</sup> Marshall Walker, ed. The Literature of the United States of America (Houndmills: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1985), p.140
- <sup>iv</sup> William van O'Conner, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), p.39
- <sup>v</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye (Louisiana State U.P., 1965), p.58
- <sup>vi</sup> John J. Enk, Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgements (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U.P., 1964), p.30
- <sup>vii</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, Ibid., p.58
- <sup>viii</sup> Quoted in William van O'Conner, Ibid., p.35
- <sup>ix</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, Ibid., p.58

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<sup>x</sup> Opus Posthumous, p.xxvii .

<sup>xi</sup> Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens  
(Durham: Duke U.P., 1963), pp.157-158

<sup>xii</sup> Light is a basic metaphor for imagination in Stevens' work.  
See, for example, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile  
Poet," where he makes the analogy between light and  
imagination. The Necessary Angel, p.16

<sup>xiii</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, Ibid., pp.57-58

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p.60

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