Paper XVIII: American Literature- II

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

This unit provides a biographical sketch of Arthur Miller first. Then a list of his major works, their themes and outlines. It also includes a detailed discussion about the styles and techniques used by him. The themes, symbols and the structure of *Death of a Salesman* are discussed next, followed by the list of major as well as minor characters. This unit concludes with a discussion about Miller's contribution to American literature and a set of questions. Lastly there is a list of further readings of Arthur Miller to gain knowledge about the critical aspects of the play.

1.2 Biographical Sketch of Arthur Miller

Synopsis

Arthur Miller was an American playwright whose biting criticism of societal problems defined his genius. His best known play is Death of a Salesman. Born in Harlem, New York in 1915, he attended the University of Michigan before moving back east to produce plays for the stage. His first critical and popular success was *Death of a Salesman*, which opened on Broadway in 1949. His very colorful public life was painted in part by his rocky marriage to Marilyn Monroe, and his unwavering refusal to cooperate with the House of Un-American Activities Committee. He was married three times and died in 2005, at the age of 89.

Early Life

Arthur Miller was raised in a moderately affluent household until his family lost almost everything in the Wall Street Crash of 1929. They subsequently fired the chauffeur and moved from the Upper East Side in Manhattan to Gravesend, Brooklyn. After graduating high school, Miller worked a few odd jobs to save enough money to attend the University of Michigan. While in college, he wrote for the student paper and completed his first play, *No Villai*n. He also took courses with the much-loved playwright professor Kenneth Rowe, a man who taught his students how to construct a play in order to achieve an intended effect. Inspired by Rowe's approach, Miller moved back east to begin his career.

Playwriting Career

Things started out a bit rocky: His 1940 play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, garnered precisely the antithesis of its title, closing after just four performances and a stack of woeful reviews. Six years later, however, *All My Sons* achieved success on Broadway, and earned him his first Tony Award (best author). Working in the small studio that he built in Roxbury, Connecticut, Miller wrote the first act of *Death of Salesman* in less than a day. It opened on February 10, 1949 at the Morosco Theatre, and was adored by nearly everyone. *Salesman* won him the triple crown of theatrical artistry: the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Tony.

In 1956, Miller left his first wife, Mary Slattery. Shortly thereafter, he married famed actress Marilyn Monroe. Later that year, the House of Un-American Activities Committee refused to renew Miller's passport, and called him in to appear before the committee—his play, *The Crucible*, a dramatization of the Salem witch trials of 1692 and an allegory of McCarthyism, was the foremost reason for their strong-armed summons. However, Miller refused to comply with the committee's demands to "out" people who had been active in certain political activities.

In 1961, Monroe starred in *The Misfits*, a film for which Miller supplied the screenplay. Around the same time, Monroe and Miller divorced.

Within several months, Miller married Austrian-born photographer Inge Morath. The couple had two children, Rebecca and Daniel. Miller insisted that their son, Daniel, who was born with Down syndrome, be completely excluded from the family's personal life. Miller's son-in-law, actor Daniel Day-Lewis, visited his wife's brother frequently, and eventually persuaded Miller to reunite with his adult son.

1.3 Major Works of Arthur Miller

- *All My Sons (1947)*
- *Death of a Salesman (1949)*
- *The Crucible (1953)*
- *A View from the Bridge (1955)*
- *After the Fall (1964)*
- *Broken Glass (1994)*

- *Resurrection Blues (2002)*
- *Finishing the Picture (2004)*

1.4 Themes and Outlines of Miller's works

Arthur Miller has tried to diagnose and locate the maladies afflicting the modern man in his plays. The theme of unrelatedness and alienation is the most important and crucial one for the playwright. It is the most pervasive theme in the plays of Arthur Miller as has been rightly pointed out by Benjamin Nelson. He says, "Like Monte Sant Angelo all of Miller's writing is invisibly prefaced by the words E. M. Forster inscribed in his novel, *Howard's End,* 'only connect'. It is precisely this lack of connection, followed by the realization of its importance, and the ultimate commitment to its achievement which forms the underlying thematic pattern of Miller's plays".

The problem of unrelatedness is a recurrent theme in the plays of Miller. He attacks and lays siege on "the fortress of unrelatedness". That man is not only related to the immediate members of his family but has got a wider responsibility to the outside world is a theme that constantly recurs in his plays. All great and serious plays, according to him, are ultimately involved with the basic problem, "How may a man make of the outside world a home"?

The problem of unrelatedness is a major theme in the plays of Miller. In his first major play, *All My Sons,* Joe Keller's myopic vision does not allow him to look beyond the four walls of his home and immediate family. He is unable to comprehend the fact that there is a world beyond his immediate neighbourhood to which he is also responsible. He fails to be the good man, the good citizen that his son, Chris, demands. His fault according to Miller and Chris is that he does not recognize any allegiance to society at large. The fact that man belongs not only to his family but also to the world beyond is unintelligible to him. In the words of Benjamin Nelson, "Keller's crime is the consequence of the pervasive illness of unrelatedness. It is this bland but lethal disease that is so frightening for Miller because it plunges into jungle anarchy all civilization's attempts at order and meaning. And it is against this barrier of unrelatedness that Chris Keller hurls himself".

Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* like Joe Keller in *All My Sons* is completely oblivious of the needs of the society and is primarily interested in the welfare of his own immediate family members – his sons, Happy and Biff. John Proctor, in the play *The Crucible,* stands as

a symbol of those who went to the scaffold cheerfully because they were more concerned about securing the approval and recognition of their actions by other members of the community and did not want their fair names to be sullied. Eddie Carbone, in the play *A View from the Bridge,* shows the same concern and wants to get back his fair name and respect in the eyes of his community. The play *A Memory of two Mondays,* portrays very poignantly the dull routine, the warping of the soul and the crushing conformity that it produces. In this play Miller has revealed that depersonalization and alienation are at the core of the sickness of modern man. The play *After the Fall,* deals with the theme of separateness, breaking of faith and betrayal. In the words of Quentin, the protagonist of the play, "Everything is one thing you see. I do not know what we are to one another". Quentin is shocked at the realization that in this world people can be so easily disposed off. The idea of separateness bewilders Quentin as one character after another tries to become a separate person in the play – Looise, Mickey and Mother. As soon as we find that our interests are not identical with someone, we start behaving like a separate person, forgetting completely even our long association and friend-ship with him. Quentin, on seeing the betrayals, becomes disgusted and disillusioned and finally tells Maggie, a character in the play. "We are all separate people. I tried not to be but finally am – a separate person". The fact that we have become completely indifferent to the needs of others and have lost the human touch has been shown in the play *Incident at Vichy,* as the Major, a character in the play, says: "There are no persons any more, don't you see that. There will never be persons again". In Arthur Miller's play *The Price,* Walter becomes as a separate person and deserts his old father to pursue his own medical career. The father also acts as a separate person in the play when he does not help Victor, his son, with his money at a time he needed it the most. Thus, we find that the theme of unrelatedness, separateness and alienation is a recurring theme in the plays of Arthur Miller.

Perhaps the most disturbing experience of modern man has been the pervasive sense of alienation. Modern man finds himself cut off from his roots, alienated and lost, in an atmosphere of moral and cultural decay that surrounds him on all sides. The vision of modern man is essentially that of a lonely figure, cut off from his immediate social and cultural milieu. In the modern world, people live in a closed, alien world of encapsulating rooms, walls and windows suggesting imprisonment of their self and separation from other human beings. And it is this acute sense of disconnectedness that accumulates their awareness of loneliness and self-alienation. We are a daily witness to the social and spiritual alienation of the individuals who, though they remain in physical proximity, find it impossible to

communicate with one another as people in the modern world have developed an attitude of indifference and callousness. Modern life is not integrated by any social purpose or moral value. On the other hand, we find man controlled and regulated by his physical needs and selfish motives. Arthur Miller has tried to show in his plays that no man can lead a life of isolation completely cut off from the rest of the society.

The fact that modern man finds himself completely alone and totally cut off from the society has led to the frantic quest for community. Arthur Miller has tried in his plays to find an answer to the question as to "how in the modern world is it possible to recapture the primary group values of affection,' compassion, solidarity and responsibility"? All these values – binding man to man – are hardly to be seen in the present-day world. The lack of personal relationship means social distance, lack of social cohesiveness and lack of responsibility for one another. In most of the cases, it is the ineffectuality of their love and affection that identifies their feeling of alienation, loneliness and apartness from others. For the loss of man's capacity to love is by far the greatest loss in modern times. An icy coldness devoid of all warmth has developed in our love relationship. In modern life we find that love, the loveliest of all emotions, often ends in betrayal. The failure and futility of love in the modern world has resulted in making man all the more lonely and lost. Love has lost its human significance and spiritual overtones. Men and women already conscious of their separation from one another get more separated instead of attaining any sense of oneness and emotional integrity. Quentin's unsuccessful marriages in *After the Fall* are an eloquent testimony of this separateness. Thus, we can conclude that throughout his long dramatic career Arthur Miller, the great American playwright, was pre-occupied with the problem of human relatedness and solidarity–the question of making the outside world his home.

1.5 Styles and Techniques used by Miller

Miller often experiments with narrative style and technique. For example, Miller includes lengthy exposition pieces that read as stage directions within *The Crucible*. At first glance, it seems that an audience must either read the information in the program or listen to a long-winded narrator. Upon further inspection however, it becomes apparent that Miller's inclusion of background material allows actors and directors to study character motivation and internalize the information, thereby portraying it in the performance.

Miller provides audiences with a unique experience when it comes to *Death of a Salesman*. In many ways, the play appears traditional. In other words, there are actors who interact with

one another, there is a basic plot line, and the play contains standard dramatic elements such as exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, and so forth. However, Miller's manipulation of time and space creates a very non-traditional atmosphere that is unsettling but effective because it mirrors Willy's mental state, thereby allowing the audience to witness his mental instability and take part in it.

Stage directions call for a complete house for the Lomans. An audience will not simply watch the action take place in the kitchen but can observe several rooms within the home. This sounds as if it would be distracting since an audience can view several things at once. After all, what should the audience look at? If more than one character is on stage, whom should the audience pay attention to? Miller solves this problem through lighting. Only characters that are talking or involved in direct action are lit on stage, all other rooms, characters, and props remain in shadow.

The result is a vast number of rooms and props that can be utilized immediately. The audience does not have to wait while a new set is erected or an old one torn down, but instead moves directly and instantaneously into the next scene. Such movement without the benefit of time delays or dialogue transitions produces a disjointed and fragmented sequence of events, much like a dream. In fact, the stage directions in Act I describe the house as follows: "An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream arising out of reality."

Miller does not stop there. Even though the action of the play can shift from one part of the house to another without delay, the action is still limited to the present. Willy's dreams, memories, or recollections of past events must be revealed in a manner that is distinct from actions taking place in the present. This is important for two reasons: First, the audience must be able to differentiate between the present and the past in order to follow the action of the play; second, Willy's increased agitation must be apparent to the audience, and there is no better way to reveal it than to have the audience observe his inability to separate the past from the reality of the present.

Miller achieves this effect by manipulating the space and boundaries of the rooms. When action takes place in the present, characters observe wall boundaries and enter and exit through the doors. During Willy's recollections of the past, characters do not observe wall boundaries, and the action generally takes place in the area at the front of the stage, rather than inside the house. As a result, the audience can distinguish present events from Willy's

memories. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, Willy pours a glass of milk in the kitchen, sits down, and begins to mumble to himself. He is in the present. He then remembers a past conversation with the teenage Biff and resumes the conversation. Since this is a past event, Willy directs his speech through the wall to a point offstage. This cues the audience that Willy is digressing in the past.

Sound is also used to create a dreamlike state for both Willy and the audience. A flute melody is associated with Willy, Ben has his own music, laughter cues the Woman, and so forth. Once the sound is introduced with the appropriate character, the audience automatically associates the sound with that same character. As a result, Miller is able to prompt reactions and expectations from the audience, whether they are aware or not. For example, in Act II, Scene 14, it appears that things have finally been settled between Willy and Biff. Even though Biff is leaving in the morning, he and Willy have reconciled. This puts the audience at ease, but once Ben's music is heard, it is evident that the play has not reached its final conclusion. In fact, Ben's appearance may create anxiety for the audience because it suggests an alternate, more disturbing, end to the play.

As the play progresses, the action shifts to the front of the stage. In other words, the audience becomes increasingly aware that the majority of the action is taking place inside Willy's head. It is difficult enough to watch an individual lose his or her identity. It is extremely unsettling and disturbing to be forced to experience the individual's memories, illusions, or perhaps delusions resulting in mental instability. Miller takes that into consideration and then pushes his audiences to the extreme. As Willy's mental state declines, the audience is forced to watch and to react. As a result, the play may be called *Death of a Salesman,* but it is a death observed and experienced by every member of the audience.

1.6 Actwise Summary of *Death of a Salesman*

Act I.1

Act I (Loman Home, Present Day):

The salesman, Willy Loman, enters his home. He appears very tired and confused. Linda Loman, his wife, puts on a robe and slippers and goes downstairs. She has been asleep. Linda is mostly jovial, but represses objections to her husband. Her struggle is to support him while still trying to guide him. She worries that he smashed the car, but he says that nothing happened. He claims that he's tired to death and couldn't make it through the rest of his trip.

He got only as far as Yonkers, and doesn't remember the details of the trip. He tells Linda that he kept swerving onto the shoulder of the road, but Linda thinks that it must be faulty steering in the car.

Linda says that there's no reason why he can't work in New York, but Willy says he's not needed there. Willy claims that if Frank Wagner were alive he would be in charge of New York by now, but that his son, Howard, doesn't appreciate him. Linda tells him that Happy took Biff on a double date, and that it was nice to see them shaving together. Linda reminds him not to lose his temper with Biff, but Willy claims that he simply had asked him if he was making any money. Willy says that there is an undercurrent of resentment in Biff, but Linda says that Biff admires his father. Willy calls Biff a lazy bum and says that he is lost. Willy longs for the days when their neighborhood was less developed and less crowded. He wakes up his sons Biff and Happy, both of whom are in the double bunk in the boys' bedroom.

Analysis:

At the beginning of the play, Arthur Miller establishes Willy Loman as a troubled and misguided man, at heart a salesman and a dreamer. He emphasizes his preoccupation with success. However, Miller makes it equally apparent that Willy Loman is not a successful man. Although in his sixties, he is still a traveling salesman bereft of any stable location or occupation, and clings only to his dreams and ideals. There is a strong core of resentment in Willy Loman's character and his actions assume a more glorious past than was actually the case. Willy sentimentalizes the neighborhood as it was years ago, and is nostalgic for his time working for Frank Wagner, especially because his former boss's son, Howard Wagner, fails to appreciate Willy. Miller presents Willy as a strong and boisterous man with great bravado but little energy to support his impression of vitality. He is perpetually weary and exhibits signs of dementia, contradicting himself and displaying some memory loss.

Linda, in contrast, shows little of Willy's boisterous intensity. Rather, she is dependable and kind, perpetually attempting to smooth out conflicts that Willy might encounter. Linda has a similar longing for an idealized past, but has learned to suppress her dreams and her dissatisfaction with her husband and sons. Miller indicates that she is a woman with deep regrets about her life; she must continually reconcile her husband with her sons, and support a man who has failed in his life's endeavor. Linda exists only in the context of her family relationships. As a mother to Biff and Happy and a husband to Willy, and must depend on them for whatever success she can grasp.

The major conflict in Death of a Salesman is between Biff Loman and his father. Even before Biff appears on stage, Linda indicates that Biff and Willy are perpetually at odds with one another because of Biff's inability to live up to his father's expectations. As Linda says, Biff is a man who has not yet "found himself." At thirty-four years old, Biff remains to some degree an adolescent. This is best demonstrated by his inability to keep a job. He and Happy still live in their old bunk beds; despite the fact that this reminds Linda of better times, it is a clear sign that neither of the sons has matured.

A major theme of the play is the lost opportunities that each of the characters face. Linda Loman, reminiscing about the days when her sons were not yet grown and had a less contentious relationship with their father, regrets the state of disarray into which her family has fallen. Willy Loman believes that if Frank Wagner had survived, he would have been given greater respect and power within the company. Willy also regrets the opportunities that have passed by Biff, whom he believes to have the capability to be a great man.

Miller uses the first segment of the play to foreshadow later plot developments. Willy worries about having trouble driving and expresses dissatisfaction with his situation at work, and Linda speaks of conflict between Willy and his sons. Each of these will become important in driving the plot and the resolution of the play.

Act I.2

Act I (Loman Home, Present Day):

At thirty-four, Biff is well-built but somewhat worn and not very self-assured. Happy, two years younger than his brother, is tall and powerfully made. He is a visibly sexual person. Both boys are somewhat lost, Happy because he has never risked defeat. The two brothers discuss their father. Happy thinks that Willy's license will be taken away, and Biff suggests that his father's eyes are going.

Happy thinks that it's funny that they are sleeping at home again, and they discuss Happy's "first time" with a girl named Betsy. Happy says that he was once very bashful with women, but as he became more confident Biff became less so. Biff wonders why his father mocks him so much, but Happy says that he wants Biff to make good. Biff tells Happy that he has had twenty or thirty different types of jobs since he left home before the war, and everything turns out the same. He reminisces about herding cattle in Nebraska and the Dakotas. But he criticizes himself for playing around with horses for twenty-eight dollars a week at his

advanced age. Happy says that Biff is a poet and an idealist, but Biff says that he's mixed up and should get married.

When Biff asks Happy if he is content, Happy defiantly says that he is not. He says that he has his own apartment, a car, and plenty of women, but is still lonely. Biff suggests that Happy come out west with him to buy a ranch. Happy claims that he dreams about ripping off his clothes in the store and boxing with his manager, for he can "outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store," yet he has to take orders from them.

Happy says that the women they went on a date with that night were gorgeous, but he gets disgusted with women: he keeps "knockin' them over" but it doesn't mean anything. Happy says that he wants someone with character, like his mother. Biff says that he thinks he may work for Bill Oliver, whom he worked for earlier in life. Biff worries that Bill will remember that he stole a carton of basketballs, and remembers that he quit because Bill was going to fire him.

Analysis:

Biff and Happy are both trapped in a perpetual adolescence. Both men are tall and well-built, but their emotional development does not mirror their physical appearance. Happy reminisces about his first sexual experience, while Biff handles a football, a sign of his childhood. The setting of the segment, the boys' childhood bedroom, also suggests that they are trapped in their past. Even the names of the two men, Happy and Biff, are childlike nicknames inappropriate for mature adults.

Biff, in particular, is a drifter who demonstrates little sense of maturity or responsibility. He moves from job to job without any particular plan, and is most content working jobs that use his physicality but do not offer any hope for a stable future. Biff is self-destructive, ruining every job opportunity that he might have, and realizes his own failure. He is aware that he is a disappointment and an embarrassment to his father, who holds great aspirations for his son. Biff feels that he is just a boy and must take steps to demonstrate a shift into the maturity of adulthood.

Happy, in contrast, is less self-aware than his brother, yet is equally confused and is similarly immature. Happy has the ostensible characteristics of adulthood including a steady profession, yet his attitude is that of a teenager. He is a manipulative womanizer who manifests little respect for the women he seduces; his euphemism for seduction, "knockin' them over," suggests at best an impersonal connection and at worst a violent subtext. Happy

clearly demonstrates aspects of a Madonna-whore complex; he cannot respect women with whom he has sex, believing them to be inauthentic, and instead wishes to have as a partner a person who has "character" such as his mother. This suggests that Happy cannot respect a woman whom he successfully seduces.

Happy's immaturity is perhaps even more apparent in this segment of the play, for his adolescent qualities starkly contrast with his adult lifestyle. Although he has a respectable job, Happy compares himself to his co-workers in terms of physical accomplishment; he believes he should not have to take orders from men over whom he is athletically superior. He thus approaches the workplace with a school-yard mentality, believing that physical strength is more important than intellectual development.

Miller contrasts the ideas that the two men have with regards to success, the major thematic concern of the play. Biff believes himself to be a failure because he does not display the trappings of adulthood, such as a steady occupation and a stable home life, and because he has made mistakes in his life. Happy, in contrast, believes himself to be a failure because although he is ostensibly more successful than his brother, he still feels empty and unfulfilled.

Act I.3

Act I (Loman Home, Past):

This segment of the act takes place in the kitchen years before. Willy reminds Biff not to make promises to a girl, because girls will always believe what you tell them and Biff is too young to be talking seriously to girls. Willy surprises the boys with a new punching bag, and as Happy exercises he brags about how he is losing weight. Biff shows Willy a football he took from the locker room, but Willy tells him to return it. Biff tells Willy that he missed him when he was away on business. Willy says that someday he'll have his own business like Uncle Charley. Willy says that he'll be bigger than Charley, because Charley is liked, but not well-liked. Willy promises to take his boys on business and show them all of the towns in New England and introduce them to the finest people.

As Happy and Biff toss the football around, Bernard enters. Bernard is worried because Biff has a state exam (Regents) the following week and has yet to study for them. Bernard heard that Mr. Birnbaum will fail Biff in his math class if he does not study, and reminds Biff that just because he has been accepted to UVA the high school does not have to graduate him. Willy tells Bernard not to be a pest, and Bernard leaves. Biff says that Bernard is "liked, but

not well liked." Willy says that Bernard may get the best grades in school, but when he gets out in the business world people like Biff and Happy will be five times ahead of him.

Linda enters, and after the boys leave she and Willy discuss the troubles that Willy has been having in his business. Willy worries that others laugh at him, but Linda reassures him, saying that he is successful because he is making seventy to a hundred dollars per week. Willy also worries that people respect Uncle Charley, who is a man of few words. Linda tells him that few men are as idolized by their children as Willy is.

Analysis:

Arthur Miller employs a disjointed time structure in Death of a Salesman, in which the play shifts settings and time within the act. The "present" time of the aged Willy Lomanand his grown sons gives way to the time when Biff and Happy were teenagers. These scenes are explanatory: the actions and conversations of teenage Biff and Happy clarify the behavior of the characters in their early thirties. The tone of these scenes is idyllic; the tension that is later apparent between Biff and Willy is nonexistent, while both characters demonstrate a confidence and contentment that has disappeared decades later.

The segment demonstrates the inherent causes of the Loman sons' immaturity. Willy has instilled in his sons a belief that appearances are more important than actual achievement or talent, contrasting his athletic and handsome sons with the hardworking yet uncharismatic Bernard. Willy values intangible characteristics such as personality over any actual barometer of achievement, which he dismisses as unimportant in the business world. The contrast that Willy makes is between men who are "liked" and men who are "well-liked," believing that to be "well-liked," as defined by charisma and physical appearance, is the major criterion for success.

This causes his sons, particularly Biff, to eschew their studies in favor of athletic achievement. Happy continually brags that he is losing weight, while Biff, ready to go to college on an athletic scholarship, shows enough disregard for his studies to fail math. This segment also foreshadows Biff's later troubles; he steals from the locker room as a teenager just as he later steals from Bill Oliver. Although Willy does not speak directly to Happy about how he should treat girls, Miller indicates that it is from his father that Happy gained his unhealthy attitude toward women.

Miller defines several major themes of Death of a Salesman in this flashback. Most importantly, he develops the theme of success and the various characters' definitions of it.

Miller presents Charley and his son Bernard as unqualified exemplars of success; Bernard is an exemplary student, while Charley owns his own business. However, Willy cannot accept the success of these two characters, believing that it is his personality that will make Willy a greater success than Charley and his sons more successful than Bernard. Yet there is an unmistakable degree of delusion in Willy's boasting; he fails to realize the limits of charm and charisma when it masks superficiality. Even Willy's claims of his own success at this point seem invalid; he brags about meeting important and powerful men, yet can only specifically describe briefly meeting the mayor of Providence. Furthermore, he worries that others do not respect him as they do Charley and that he is not making enough money. Even in the prime of his life, Willy Loman is an inauthentic man whose dreams exceed his limited grasp.

Act I.4

Act I (Hotel Room, Past):

Willy crosses from one part of the stage to another, where a woman is standing, putting on her scarf. Willy says that he gets so lonely, and gets the feeling that he'll never make a living for her or a business for the boys. The woman claims that she picked Willy for his sense of humor. Willy tells her that he will be back in about two weeks and that he will see her the next time he is in Boston.

Analysis:

Miller readily switches from location to location during Death of a Salesman, as the flashback to Willy at home switches to a flashback of Willy in a hotel room in Boston. This serves as an ironic counterpoint to Linda's comment that Willy is idolized by his children; the fact that he is having an affair shows that Willy is not a man worthy of such fervent admiration. He displays the same callous disregard for women that Happy demonstrates as an adult, yet where Happy disregards women with whom he has insubstantial relationships, Willy is unfaithful to the devoted Linda. The flashback also demonstrates that Willy is not a man respected by others; the woman with whom he has an affair selected Willy for his sense of humor rather than for any substantial qualities.

Act I.5

Act I (Loman Home, Past):

Willy is back in the kitchen with Linda, who reassures him that he is a handsome man. Linda mends her stocking, but Willy tells her that he does not want her to do such menial tasks. Willy returns to the porch, where he tells Bernard to give Biff the answers to the Regents exam. Bernard says that he normally gives Biff the answers, but Regents is a State exam and he could be arrested. Bernard says that Biff is driving the car without a license and will flunk math. Willy also hears the woman's voice (from the hotel room), and screams for it to shut up. Willy explodes at Linda, saying that there's nothing the matter with Biff. He asks her if she wants Biff to be a worm like Bernard. Linda, almost in tears, exits into the living room.

Analysis:

This segment of the chapter, also a flashback, returns to the Loman household, which is the setting for most of the play. Miller contrasts Willy's life on the road in which he behaves like a callous womanizer with his behavior as a husband at home. A great deal of Willy's dedication to Linda stems from his own sense of pride; he does not want her to mend stockings because it shows that he cannot provide her with the financial resources to buy new stockings. Miller further establishes the contrast between Biff and Bernard; Bernard is more concerned with Biff's studies than either Biff or Willy, while Biff is reckless and abusive.

Willy Loman deals with each of these problems through denial. He tells Linda that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Biff, particularly in comparison to Bernard. However, Willy feels the strain of his indiscretions, as is shown when he hears the voice of the woman with whom he has had an affair. The problems that Willy has during his later years are to a great extent self-inflicted, the product of long-standing guilt for his actions.

Act I.6

Act I (Loman Home, Present Day):

Willy tells Happy that he nearly hit a kid in Yonkers. Willy wonders why he didn't go to Alaska with his brother Ben, because the man was a genius: success incarnate. Ben ended up with diamond mines: he walked into a jungle and came out rich at the age of twenty-one. Happy tells Willy that he should retire. Charley enters. As Willy and Charley play cards, Charley offers Willy a job, which insults him. Willy asks Charley why Biff is going back to Texas, but Charley tells him to let Biff go. Willy talks about the ceiling he put up in the living room, but refuses to give any details. When Charley wonders how he could put up a ceiling, Willy shouts at him that a man who can't handle tools is not a man, and calls Charley disgusting.

Uncle Ben enters, a stolid man in his sixties with a mustache and an authoritative air. Willy tells Ben that he is getting awfully tired, but since Charley cannot see Ben, Willy tells him that for a second Charley reminded him of his brother Ben, who died several weeks ago in Africa. Ben asks Willy if their mother is living with him, but Willy said that she died a long time ago. Charley, who cannot see Ben, wonders what Willy is talking about. Finally Charley becomes unnerved and leaves.

Analysis:

If Charley and Bernard are the symbols of tangible material success in Death of a Salesman, Willy's older brother Ben symbolizes the broadest reaches of success, which are intangible and practically imaginary. Whether Ben is a Horatio Alger figure, a character whose history is to be taken literally, is disputable; some aspects of his biography are so romanticized and absurdly grandiose that it is likely that the information that Miller gives concerning Ben is filtered throughWilly Loman's imagination. When Ben appears in the play, it is only as a representation of Willy's imagination. For Willy, Ben represents fantastic success gained through intangible luck rather than through the boredom of steady dedication and hard work; Ben has gained what Willy always wanted but never could achieve.

The encounter between Charley and Willy illustrates that Willy feels some jealousy toward his friend for his success. Willy offers advice to Charley at every opportunity in an attempt to assert some dominance over him. He interprets a man as a person who can handle tools well, returning to a physical definition of manhood in comparison to monetary or status-based definitions that would assert Charley's superiority.

Likewise, Charley seems to realize Willy's envy, and behaves tentatively toward his friend. Although he does injure Willy's pride by offering him a job, Charley does so tentatively, for he has great pity for Willy that he knows he must mask. Charley does, however, give the soundest advice to Willy, advising him to let Biff do what he pleases and leave for Texas.

Act I.7

Act I (Loman Home, Past):

While Willy talks with Ben, Linda (as a younger woman) enters. Willy asks Ben where his father is, but Ben says that he didn't find his father in Alaska, for he never made it there. Ben claims he had a very faulty view of geography and ended up in Africa instead of Alaska. Willy was only three years, eleven months old when Ben left. Young Biff and Happy enter, and Willy introduces them to Uncle Ben, a "great man." Ben boasts that their father was a

very great man, an inventor who could make more money in a week than another man could make in a lifetime. Willy shows Biff to Ben, and says that he's bringing up Biff to be like their father. Biff and Ben start to spar; Ben trips Biff, then tells him never to fight fair with a stranger, because he will never get out of the jungle that way. Ben leaves, wishing Willy good luck on whatever he does.

Charley returns, and reprimands Willy for letting his kids steal lumber from the nearby building that is being refurbished. Willy says that he reprimanded them, but that he has a "couple of fearless characters" as his children. Charley tells him that the jails are full of fearless characters, but Ben says that so is the stock exchange. Bernard enters and says that the watchman is chasing Biff, but Willy says that he is not stealing anything. Willy says that he will stop by on his way back to Africa, but Willy begs him to stay and talk. Willy worries that he's not teaching his sons the right kind of knowledge. Ben repeats that when he walked into the jungle he was seventeen, and when he walked out he was twenty-one and fantastically rich.

Analysis:

Once again, Miller shifts the setting of the play to previous years in a seemingly imaginary scene that contrasts Willy's failed aspirations with the supposedly great accomplishments of his brother Ben. Willy deals almost entirely in superlatives. Ben is a legendary man who, out of pure luck, ended up the owner of a diamond mine. Ben, who exists as an extension of Willy's imagination, speaks of their father in similar terms, as a "great man" and an inventor. These boasts are exaggerations meant to emphasize Willy's feelings of inadequacy in comparison to his brother and father. Willy even pathetically attempts to justify life in Brooklyn as a life comparable to that in the outdoors. This familial history provides a neat complement to Willy's relationship with Biff; just as Biff feels himself a failure in his father's eyes, Willy perceives himself to be inadequate in comparison to his father and brother.

The second appearance of Young Biff and Young Happy reinforces the values that Willy has instilled in his sons. Happy once again brags about losing weight, showing his focus on physical appearance and athleticism, while Biff steals from the nearby construction site. For Willy, stealing is merely an extension of a capitalist mindset; he makes no distinction between the fearless character in jail and the fearless character in the stock exchange. This demonstrates the insufficiencies of Willy's views on success: he attributes success to luck or immorality and cannot see the virtues of hard work and discipline as shown by Charley and

Bernard. Willy can conceive of success as a mantra by Ben or the result of fearless daring, but he cannot imagine that hard work and dedication are critical to the formula. Willy's business values inform his instructions to his sons, while their instructions from Willy inform their behavior in the business world.

Act I.8

Act I (Loman Home, Present Day):

Ben leaves, but Willy still speaks to him as Linda enters. Willy wonders what happened to the diamond watch fob that Ben gave to him when he came from Africa. Linda reminds him that he pawned it to pay for Biff's radio correspondence course. Biff and Happy come downstairs in their pajamas, and ask Linda how long Willy has been talking to himself. Linda says that this has been going on for years. Linda says that she would have told Biff, if he had an address where he could be reached. She also says that Willy is at his worst when Biff comes home, and asks Biff why they are so hateful to one another. Biff claims that he is trying to change.

Linda asks if he thinks about Willy. She says that if Biff has no feelings for his father, then he has no feeling for her either. Linda says that Willy is the dearest man in the world to her, and she won't have anyone making him feel unwanted. Biff tells her to stop making excuses for Willy because he never had an ounce of respect for her. Happy tells Biff not to call their father crazy. Biff says that Willy has no character. She tells him that Willy never made a lot of money, and that he is not the finest character, but he is a human being and "attention must be paid" to him.

Linda recounts the indignities that Willy has suffered, such as having to borrow money from Charley, and she calls Happy a philanderer. Biff wants to stay with his parents and promises not to fight with Willy. Biff says that Willy threw him out before because his father is a fake who does not like anybody who knows the truth about him. Linda says that Willy is dying and that he's been trying to kill himself. When Willy had his car accident in February, a woman saw that he deliberately smashed into the bridge railing to drive his car into the river. Willy has also tried to use the gas line to kill himself. Biff apologizes to Linda and promises to stay and try to become a success. Happy tells Biff that he never tries to please people in business, and that he whistles in the elevator.

Willy enters and tells Biff that he never grew up, and that Bernard does not whistle in the elevator. Biff says that Willy does whistle, however. Biff tells Willy that he's going to see

Bill Oliver tomorrow to talk about the sporting good business. Happy says that the beauty of the plan is that it would be like they were playing ball again. Willy says that it is personality that wins the day. After the boys leave, Linda worries that Oliver won't remember Biff. Willy says that if Biff had stayed with Oliver he'd be on top now. Willy reminisces about Biff's ball game at Ebbets Field. He promises that the next day, he'll ask Harold if he can work in New York.

Biff finds Willy's rubber tubing behind the heater, and is horrified.

Analysis:

Miller, who returns to the present reality of the play in this segment, definitively establishes that the "flashbacks" occur in the context of Willy Loman's imagination and are a symptom of a larger dementia. Linda attributes her husband's hallucinations to Biff's presence, likely a sign that Biff reminds Willy of his failures as a father and as a businessman. However, the aspect of Willy's dementia that Miller focuses on during this segment of the play is the effect which it has on Linda. She has been the one to deal with Willy's erratic behavior alone, and doing so has made her age considerably. She is her husband's only defender, even when this role threatens to further exacerbate the conflicts that her family faces.

Miller deals with the indignities that Willy has suffered largely in terms of their effect on Linda. Since her existence and identity depend entirely on her husband, she staunchly defends him even when she realizes that he does not deserve to be defended. When she tells Biff that he cannot love her if he does not love Willy, Linda essentially chooses her husband over her children. She does this largely out of a strong feeling of duty toward Willy, for she knows that she is the only person who shows any concern for whether he lives or dies. Significantly, she centers her defense of Willy on his status as a human being and not his role as a father or husband. In these respects, Linda thus admits Willy's failures but nevertheless still maintains that "attention must be paid" to him. This declaration is significant in its construction; Linda declares that someone must regard Willy, but does not specify anybody in particular, thus avoiding a particular accusation of her sons. She condemns society in general for the ill treatment of her husband. As shown by Linda's condemnation of Happy's philandering and Biff's immaturity, Linda has few qualms about confronting her sons, yet when she demands attention for her husband she does not lay the blame only on them.

However, as Miller ennobles Linda as the long-suffering and devoted wife, he nevertheless shows Willy Loman to be undeserving of the respect and admiration Linda accords him. Biff

emphasizes the fact that Willy has no sense of character and no respect for Linda, while hints about her physical appearance emphasize that Linda has aged considerably because of her demanding husband.

The final segment of the first act serves as a turning point for Biff, who realizes that he must "apply himself" as his parents have demanded of him. This revelation comes when Linda reveals that Willy has attempted suicide, finally focusing on the severity of his plight. Willy's suicide attempts are the mark of a failed man, but, more importantly, show the disparity between his aspirations and his actual achievements.

Biff's idea of a sporting goods business with his brother demonstrates the various character flaws of Biff and his father. It continues the family emphasis on appearance and personality over substance and achievement. Biff places his aspirations for success on Bill Oliver just as his father depended on Frank Wagner; Linda rightly worries about this, thinking that Bill Oliver may not remember Biff. Finally, the idea of the sporting goods business emphasizes the immaturity of Biff and Happy; both men want to work in sporting goods as an attempt to relive their youth and high school athletic glory. Even Willy himself sees this as an opportunity for himself and his sons to regain what they had lost decades before.

Act II.1

Act II (Loman Home, Present Day):

Willy sits at the kitchen table the next morning. He claims that he slept well for the first time in months. Linda says that it was thrilling to see the boys leaving together, and says that Biff had a new, hopeful attitude. Willy dreams about buying a little place in the country. Linda asks Willy if he will talk to Howard today, and he says that he will tell Howard to take him off the road. Linda tells him that he is supposed to meet the boys for dinner at Frank's Chop House. As soon as Willy leaves, Linda gets a phone call from Biff. She tells him that the pipe that Willy connected to the gas heater is gone; Willy must have taken it away himself. She is disappointed to learn that Biff is the one who took it away.

Analysis:

The second act begins with a dramatic shift in tone from the previous act, as Willy now appears cheerful and optimistic. Most importantly, the pipe connected to the gas heater with which Willy tried to commit suicide is now gone; Linda automatically assumes that Willy took it away himself, although this will come into question later in the play.

But the sense of optimism that dominates the start of the act is somewhat unfounded. His change in mood is entirely based on Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver, trumped up in Willy's mind to a sure-bet business plan. Willy has gone from suicidal to confident and cheerful in the matter of one night, despite the fact that nothing concrete has been resolved, because the dream of the Oliver plan gave him hope.

II.2

Act II (Wagner's Office, Present Day):

Willy enters the office of his boss, Howard Wagner, a thirty-six year old man sitting at a typewriter table with a wire-recording machine. Howard plays Willy recordings of Howard's daughter and son. Willy tries to tell Howard what he wants, but Howard insists on playing a recording of his wife. Willy tells Howard that he would prefer not to travel anymore, but Howard says Willy is a road man. Willy says that he was in the firm when Howard's father used to carry him as a boy. Howard does not have a spot.

Willy talks about how being a salesman used to be a position that had personality in it and demanded comradeship and respect, but today there is no room for friendship or personality. Willy keeps asking for lower and lower salaries. Howard's father made promises to Willy, he cries, but Howard tells him to pull himself together, and then leaves. Willy leans on the desk and turns on the wire recorder. Willy leaps away with fright and shouts for Howard. Howard returns and fires Willy, telling him that he needs a good, long rest. Howard tells him that this is no time for false pride and he should rely on his sons.

Analysis:

In this segment of the second act, Arthur Miller uses Howard Wagner as a symbol of progress and innovation in contrast with Willy Loman's outdated notions of business tactics. Most of the details in Howard's office emphasize technological innovation and novelty, from his well-appointed, modern office to the recording machine that fascinates Howard. This shows that Howard is more interested in the future than the past, as he ignores Willy to consider his new machine. In contrast, Willy speaks not of his future with the company but with his history and past promises. That Willy is frightened by the recorder is a symbol of Willy's obsolescence within a modern business world; he cannot deal with innovation. Even his values, as he notes, belong to a different time. Willy speaks of a past time when being a salesman demanded respect and friendship, a time that has clearly passed, if it ever existed at all.

Willy once again falls prey to his idea that personality and personal relationships are critical factors in the business world. He cites the memory of Howard's father bringing Howard as a newborn to the office and his own role in helping to name the boy. While personally relevant, in terms of the business world this fact bears little weight.

II.3

Act Two (Loman Home, Past):

Howard exits and Ben enters, carrying his valise and umbrella. Willy asks him if he has secured the Alaska deal. The younger version of Linda enters, and she tells Ben that Willy has a great job in New York. She tells him not to go to Alaska. She wonders why everybody must conquer the world, and tells Willy that he's well-liked, and that Old Man Wagner promised that Willy would be a member of the firm someday. Young Biff enters with Young Happy. Willy insists that it is "who you know" that counts, but Ben leaves. Young Bernard arrives, and begs Biff to let him carry his helmet, but Happy wants to carry it. Willy prepares to escort them to the championship game. Willy tells Charley that he cannot go to Biff's baseball game because there is no room in the car. Willy is insulted when he thinks that Charley forgot about the game. Willy prepares to fight Charley.

Analysis:

Miller once again shifts the setting of the play to an earlier date in order to contrast Willy's present experiences with those of his idealized past. The reappearance of Ben is symbolic of the dreams Willy Lomanhas sacrificed for a more secure - and more mundane - existence. This segment gives some indication that Linda has, in some respects, limited her husband by forcing him to take a more stable path. She claims that not every man has to conquer the world, perhaps assuming that Willy Loman is not a man capable of doing so.

However, Miller reemphasizes Willy's belief in personal connections as the critical factor in business. By this point in the play, Willy's claim that it is "who you know" that counts has been thoroughly disproved, for Willy was fired by a man whom he has known since his birth.

Bernard and Charley's reappearance in this segment foreshadow their later roles in the play. This segment reestablishes the contentious relationship between Charley and Willy, who is shocked to think that Charley may not be in total awe of Biff's athletic achievements. It also reiterates the way in which Bernard remained in Charley's shadow. The dynamic among the

characters has obviously shifted, and Miller's insertion of a flashback at this point foreshadows a later development of the dynamic between the Lomans, Bernard, and Charley.

II.4

Act Two (Charley's Office, Present Day):

Bernard, now mature, sits in Charley's office. Willy talks to Bernard, who tells him that he's going to leave for Washington soon. Willy tells Bernard about the deal with Bill Oliver, and asks Bernard his secret. Willy wonders why Biff's life ended after the Ebbets Field game. Bernard asks why Willy did not tell Biff to go to summer school so that he could pass math. Around that time, Biff disappeared for a month to see his father in New England, and when he came back he burned his UVA sneakers. Bernard wonders what happened in New England.

Charley enters and tells Willy that Bernard is going to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court. Charley gives Willy some money. Willy complains about Howard firing him, but Charley says that things like naming a child do not matter: the only thing that matters is what you can sell. Charley offers him a job again, even though he admits that he does not like Willy and Willy does not like him. Willy refuses once more, and Charley realizes that the sticking point is jealousy. Charley gives him money for insurance, and Willy remarks that a person is worth more dead than alive. Willy tells Charley to apologize to Bernard for him, and, on the verge of tears, tells Charley that he is his only friend.

Analysis:

Miller juxtaposes the unsuccessful Willy Loman with the great successes of Bernard and Charley in this segment. Miller continues to develop Willy Loman as a pathetic and deranged character who hallucinates and shouts to himself as he walks through the hallway of an office building. Bernard, in contrast, is a successful man, esteemed in his profession and content with his private life.

The portrayal of Bernard that Miller offers in this segment is ironic, considering Willy's previous comparisons of Bernard to his sons. While Willy believed that Bernard's more serious behavior and lack of "personality" would hobble him once he entered the business world, the opposite seems to be the case. While Happy is at best moderately successful and unhappy, and Biff is an outright failure, Bernard, whom Willy believed to have skills not applicable to the business world, is an obvious success. Bernard himself even seems to realize

that Willy's expectations for his sons have been thwarted, and holds back from telling Willy the reason why he is going to Washington in order to avoid embarrassing him.

Bernard also serves to elucidate the development of the relationship between Willy and Biff Loman. Bernard can pinpoint a turning point in their relationship, citing a specific time after which Biff's attitude toward his father changed. Bernard seems to attribute this occurrence to Biff's current failure, claiming that Biff never wanted to go to summer school or graduate high school after visiting his father in New England. Miller makes it clear that Willy is directly responsible for Biff's failures. According to Bernard's interpretation of the event, Biff is nearly self-destructive, ruining his chances for a stable future in order to spite his father.

Charley also represents a degree of success and serenity that Willy is unable to achieve. It is Charley who best identifies the problem with Willy's philosophy of business: Willy wrongly believes that it is personality and intangible factors that are critical to success, while Charley knows that it is in fact more concrete factors such as sales that determine whether a man is successful. Charley also realizes the degree to which Willy is jealous of him and his son; he believes that this is the reason that Willy will not accept a job from him.

The relationship between Charley and Willy is not based on affection, but rather on custom and a developed sense of obligation. Charley admits that he does not like Willy and Willy dislikes him in return, but Charley is in fact Willy's only friend. This declaration is one of the few moments in the play in which Willy seems to realize and acknowledge his own pathetic state. This is accompanied by Willy's claim that a person is worth more dead than alive, which emphasizes Willy's suicidal state and foreshadows events to come.

II.5

Act Two (Restaurant, Present Day):

At the restaurant, Stanley the waiter seats Happy. A lavishly dressed girl enters and sits at the next table, and Happy tells Stanley to bring her champagne. Biff enters as Happy flirts with the girl, who is named Miss Forsythe. Happy tells Miss Forsythe that Biff is a quarterback with the New York Giants. Happy asks the girl out, and asks her if she can find a friend for Biff. The girl exits, and Happy remarks that girls like that are why he can't get married.

Biff tells Happy that he did a terrible thing. Bill Oliver did not remember Biff, and walked away when Biff approached him. Biff stole his fountain pen, though. Biff insists that they tell

their father tonight to prove that Biff is not lying about his failures just to spite Willy. Happy tells him to say that he has a lunch date with Oliver tomorrow and to prolong the charade, because Willy is never so happy as when he is looking forward to something. Willy arrives, and tells his sons that he was fired. Although Biff tries to lie to Willy about his meeting with Oliver, Biff and Willy fight when Willy thinks that Biff insulted Bill Oliver. Biff finally gives up, and tells Happy that he cannot talk to Willy. As Biff tries to explain, Willy imagines himself arguing with Young Biff and Young Bernard about Biff failing math, and imagines Bernard telling Linda that Biff went to Boston to see Willy. Biff continues to explain what happened while Willy imagines the woman in the hotel room. Miss Forsythe returns with another woman and Willy leaves. Biff and Happy argue over who should do something about their dad. Happy denies to the women that Willy is their father.

Analysis:

While Biff's failures and flaws have been a major preoccupation throughout the play, this segment demonstrates how detrimental Happy's character flaws can be. A compulsive womanizer, Happy tells blatant lies to the women that he meets, claiming that Biff is a professional athlete, then gets rid of his father in favor of seducing Miss Forsythe. In the final, most cruel move that Happy makes, he denies that Willy is his father, thus repudiating his father even more callously than Biff has done.

Biff, in contrast, merely continues his pattern of foolish mistakes in this segment. While Biff may have started to fail in order to spite his father, by this point his self-destructive behavior is ingrained. His plan to ask Bill Oliver for money was dubious at best, but Biff made it even more unlikely by pseudo-accidentally pocketing his fountain pen. In contrast to Happy, Biff does show some concern for his father's feelings; he worries that Willy will think that Biff intentionally botched the meeting with Bill Oliver.

The Loman sons' insistence on framing Biff's meeting with Bill Oliver in the best possible terms shows that their true interest in the sporting goods business is not for personal gain, but rather to please their father. Biff believes that he cannot tell Willy the truth about his meeting with Bill Oliver, because Willy will think that Biff purposely sabotaged the meeting as an affront to him. Biff's concern is primarily what his father thinks of him and what affect this will have on him; his failure during the meeting, with the exception of his embarrassment over taking the fountain pen, is barely a consideration unless it involves how his father will

react to the event. Miller demonstrates that in spite of his weakness, Willy still dominates his sons, whose actions are based on how their father will react to them.

Willy's hallucination about Young Biff failing math and visiting him in Boston gives a greater indication of the reason why Biff garnered such animosity toward his father. Willy ties Biff's visit to Boston with his affair in the same city; the likely confrontation between Willy's life at home as a father and his life on the road as a salesman seems to provide the motivation for Biff's spiteful, self-destructive behavior.

II.6

Act Two (Hotel Room, Past):

Willy follows the Woman as he buttons his shirt. Someone knocks on the door, but Willy says he is not expecting anybody. The Woman claims that Willy ruined her, and that whenever he comes to the office she will make sure that he goes right through to the buyers. The knocking persists, and Willy tells the Woman to stay in the bathroom while he opens the door. It is Biff, who tells Willy that he flunked math. Biff begs Willy to talk to Mr. Birnbaum, his teacher, to convince him to pass Biff.

Biff hears the woman laugh, and she enters from the bathroom. Willy tells Biff that the woman is staying in the next room, which is being painted, so he let her take a shower in his room. Willy throws the woman out, as she claims Willy promised to buy her a pair of stockings. Willy tries to explain that the woman is a buyer, but Biff starts to cry. Willy admits that he had a relationship with the woman, but claims that it means nothing to him, and that he was lonely.

Analysis:

Once again returning to the Loman family's past, Miller finally gives a full explanation for Biff's refusal to take a summer school course, the critical event that determined his chain of failures. It is Willy's infidelity that prompted the change in Biff, as he learned that his father was having an affair with the woman in Boston. Yet the revelation of this reason for Biff's bitterness is not the only example in this segment of how Willy has carelessly ruined the lives of those around him. Willy has ruined the reputation of the Woman, but can offer nothing to her in return. Despite the promises that he has made to her, he denies and discards her. This parallels Willy's earlier insistence that Linda should not mend stockings. Stockings serve as a symbol of what Willy can provide and as a measure of his success.

II.7

Act Two (Restaurant, Present Day):

At the restaurant, Stanley stands in front of Willy as Willy shouts at the waiter, thinking that he is Biff. Stanley tells Willy that his boys left with the two women and said that they will see him at home. Stanley tries to help him. Willy asks if there is a seed store in the neighborhood, because he has to buy some seeds to plant. Willy leaves for the seed store.

Analysis:

Yet another humiliation for Willy Lomanoccurs in this segment: his sons have abandoned him at the restaurant, leaving him alone with the waiter while they go out with the two superficial women. Willy's preoccupation with seeds is symbolic of his realization that he has created nothing permanent or worthwhile in his life. As a salesman, he is merely a liaison for what others create, while the family that he made himself has abandoned him at the restaurant. Seeds symbolize something more permanent and tangible even than his family. This new theme also relates back to Willy's seeming embarrassment at Ben's notion that he cannot hunt or fish in Brooklyn; Willy worries that, as a salesman, he is not close enough to nature. His wish to plant seeds is a way to compensate for this deficiency.

Act I.8

Act I (Loman Home, Present Day):

Ben leaves, but Willy still speaks to him as Linda enters. Willy wonders what happened to the diamond watch fob that Ben gave to him when he came from Africa. Linda reminds him that he pawned it to pay for Biff's radio correspondence course. Biff and Happy come downstairs in their pajamas, and ask Linda how long Willy has been talking to himself. Linda says that this has been going on for years. Linda says that she would have told Biff, if he had an address where he could be reached. She also says that Willy is at his worst when Biff comes home, and asks Biff why they are so hateful to one another. Biff claims that he is trying to change.

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The final segment of the first act serves as a turning point for Biff, who realizes that he must "apply himself" as his parents have demanded of him. This revelation comes when Linda reveals that Willy has attempted suicide, finally focusing on the severity of his plight. Willy's suicide attempts are the mark of a failed man, but, more importantly, show the disparity between his aspirations and his actual achievements.

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Requiem

Requiem:

Charley tells Linda that it is getting dark as she stares at Willy's grave. Deeply angered, Happy tells Linda that Willy had no right to commit suicide. Linda wonders where all of the people that Willy knew are. Linda says it is the first time in thirty-five years that she and Willy were nearly free and clear financially, because Willy only needed a little salary. Biff says that Willy had the wrong dreams and that he never knew who he was. Charley says that "nobody dast blame this man," for Willy was a salesman, and for a salesman there is no rock bottom to the life. A salesman has to dream.

Biff asks Happy to leave the city with him, but Happy says that he's going to stay in the city and beat the racket, and show that Willy did not die in vain. Charley, Happy and Biff leave, while Linda remains at the grave. She asks why Willy did what he did, and says that she has just made the last payment on the house today, and that they are free and clear.

Analysis:

Willy Loman's funeral is a cruel and pathetic end to the salesman's life. Only his family and Charley attend, while none of his other customers, friends, or colleagues bother to pay their respects. However, the funeral rests primarily on Willy's status as a salesman: it is the character of a salesman that determined Willy's course of action, according to Miller. For a salesman, there are only dreams and hope for future sales. Happy and Biff interpret Willy's suicide in terms of these business dreams: Happy wishes to stay in the city and succeed where his father failed, while Biff rejects the business ethos that destroyed his father and plans to leave New York. Both Happy and Charley frame Willy Loman as a martyr figure, blameless for his suicide and noble in his aspirations, repudiating the humiliations that Willy suffered during the course of the play.

The play ends on an ironic note, as Linda claims that she has made the final payment on their house, creating a sense of financial security for the Lomans for the first time. Willy Loman worked for thirty-five years in order to build this sense of security and stability, yet committed suicide before he could enjoy the results of his labor.

2. Themes, Symbols and Structure of *Death of a Salesman*

2.1 Structure of *Death of a Salesman*

CONFLICT

Protagonist:

Willy Loman is the protagonist. He is a traveling salesman, the low man of popular United States culture, who believes in the false promises of the American Dream.

Antagonist:

The antagonist is the false promise of the American Dream, which makes people believe that anyone in the United States can become rich through only hard work, perseverance, or personality. The dream also seems to say that the individual need not master any form of skill or profession to make it big. Unfortunately, Willy is overcome by his dreams and illusions during the course of the play. He is fired by the company that he believes will promote him; he is rejected by his sons, for whom he has worked and struggled; and he is forced to see that his life and his philosophies are lies.

Climax:

Biff, Willy's son, makes his father see that both he and Willy are failures, who will never obtain the American Dream. Biff makes his father realize the emptiness of their lives and the unimportance of being well liked. Willy Loman cannot face or accept this reality.

Outcome:

The play ends in tragedy. Willy commits suicide in order to financially provide for his family, especially to safeguard Biff's future with the receipt of Willy's twenty thousand dollar insurance policy.

2.2 Themes

2.2.1 The American Dream

The American Dream that anyone can achieve financial success and material comfort lies at the heart of Death of a Salesman. Various secondary characters achieve the Dream in different ways: Ben goes off into the wilderness of Alaska and Africa and lucks into wealth by discovering a diamond mine; Howard Wagner inherits his Dream through his father's company; while Bernard, who seemed a studious bore as a child, becomes a successful lawyer through hard work. Willy Loman's version of the Dream, which has been influenced by his brother Ben's success, is that any man who is manly, good looking, charismatic, and well-liked deserves success and will naturally achieve it.

Over the course of his lifetime, Willy and his sons fall short of the impossible standards of this dream. But the real tragedy of the play is not that Willy fails to achieve the financial success promised in his American dream, but rather that he buys into the dream so thoroughly that he ignores the tangible things around him, such as the love of his family, while pursuing the success he hopes will bring his family security. By sacrificing himself at the end of the play in order to get his family the money from his life insurance policy, Willy literally kills himself for money. In the process, he demonstrates that the American dream, while a powerful vehicle of aspiration, can also turn a human being into a product or commodity whose sole value is his financial worth.

2.2.2 Fathers and Sons

The central conflict of the play is between Willy and his elder son Biff, who showed great promise as a young athlete and ladies' man, but in adulthood has become a thief and drifter with no clear direction. Willy's other son, Happy, while on a more secure career path, is superficial and seems to have no loyalty to anyone.

By delving into Willy's memories, the play is able to trace how the values Willy instilled in his sons—luck over hard work, likability over expertise—led them to disappoint both him and themselves as adults. The dream of grand, easy success that Willy passed on to his sons is both barren and overwhelming, and so Biff and Happy are aimless, producing nothing, and it is Willy who is still working, trying to plant seeds in the middle of the night, in order to give his family sustenance. Biff realizes, at the play's climax, that only by escaping from the dream that Willy has instilled in him will father and son be free to pursue fulfilling lives. Happy never realizes this, and at the end of the play he vows to continue in his father's footsteps, pursuing an American Dream that will leave him empty and alone.

2.2.3 Nature vs. City

The towering apartment buildings that surround Willy's house, which make it difficult for him to see the stars and block the sunlight that would allow him to grow a garden in his back yard, represent the artificial world of the city—with all its commercialism and superficiality—encroaching on his little spot of self-determination. He yearns to follow the rugged trail his brother Ben has blazed, by going into the wildernesses of Africa and Alaska in search of diamonds, or even building wooden flutes and selling them on the rural frontier

of America as his father did. But Willy is both too timid and too late. He does not have the courage to head out into nature and try his fortune, and, anyway, that world of a wild frontier waiting to be explored no longer exists. Instead, the urban world has replaced the rural, and Willy chooses to throw his lot in with the world of sales, which does not involve making things but rather selling oneself.

Biff and Happy embody these two sides of Willy's personality: the individualist dreamer and the eager-to-please salesman. Biff works with his hands on farms, helping horses give birth, while Happy schemes within the stifling atmosphere of a department store. While Willy collects household appliances and cars, as the American Dream has taught him to do, these things do not ultimately leave him satisfied, and he thinks of his own death in terms of finally venturing into nature, the dark jungle that the limits of his life have never allowed him to enter.

2.2.4 Abandonment and Betrayal

Inspired by his love for his family, Willy ironically abandons them (just as he himself was abandoned by his father when he was three). The tragedy of Willy's death comes about because of his inability to distinguish between his value as an economic resource and his identity as a human being. The Woman, with whom Willy cheats on Linda, is able to feed Willy's salesman ego by "liking" him. He is proud of being able to sell himself to her, and this feeling turns to shame only when he sees that by giving stockings to The Woman rather than Linda, he is sabotaging his role as a provider. He doesn't see that his love, not material items, is the primary thing Linda needs from him.

The link between love and betrayal is present throughout the play: part of Biff's revelation at the play's end is that Willy has betrayed him by encouraging him to settle for nothing less than greatness, thus making the compromises of the real world impossibly difficult. Happy, and even Linda, also betray Willy out of a kind impulse to not shake him out of his illusions, which forces Willy's fragile mind to deal alone with the growing discrepancy between his dreams and his life.

2.3 Symbols

2.3.1 Rubber Hose

The rubber hose is a symbol of Willy's impending suicide. Linda finds it hidden behind the fuse box in the cellar, and the "new little nipple" she finds on the gas pipe of the water heater leads her to the conclusion that Willy had planned to inhale gas. Like Willy's other attempted method of suicide—driving off the road in the car he uses to travel to work—the rubber hose points how the conveniences such as the car and water heater that Willy works so hard to buy to afford might, under their surface, be killing him.

2.3.2 Stockings

During his affair with The Woman, Willy gives her the intimate gift of stockings. Biff's outburst at discovering Willy with The Woman—"You gave her Mama's stockings!"-- fixes the stockings in Willy's mind as a symbol of his betrayal. He has let his wife down emotionally, and he is siphoning the family's already strained financial resources toward his ego-stroking affair.

2.3.3 Seeds

"I don't have a thing in the ground!" Willy laments after both his sons abandon him in Act 2. The sons he has cultivated with his own values have grown to disappoint him, none of his financial hopes have borne fruit, and he is desperate to have some tangible result of a lifetime of work. By planting vegetable seeds, he is attempting to begin anew. But as Linda gently reminds him, the surrounding buildings don't provide enough light for a garden. Willy's attempt to plant the vegetable seeds at night further reinforces the futility of his efforts.

2.3.4 Flute

The flute music that drifts through the play represents the single faint link Willy has with his father and with the natural world. The elder Loman made flutes, and was apparently able to make a good living by simply traveling around the country and selling them. This anticipates Willy's career as a salesman, but also his underused talent for building things with his hands, which might have been a more fulfilling job. The flute music is the sound of the road Willy didn't take.

3. Character List

3.1 Major Characters

3.1.1 Willy Loman

Death of a Salesman is Willy's play. Everything revolves around his actions during the last 24 hours of his life. All the characters act in response to Willy, whether in the present or in Willy's recollection of the past. Willy's character, emotions, motivations, and destiny are developed through his interactions with others. The problem arises, however, because Willy reacts to characters in the present, while simultaneously responding to different characters and different situations in the past. The result is Willy's trademark behavior: contradictory, somewhat angry, and often obsessive.

Willy is an individual who craves attention and is governed by a desire for success. He constantly refers to his older brother Ben, who made a fortune in diamond mining in Africa, because he represents all the things Willy desires for himself and his sons. Willy is forced to work for Howard, the son of his old boss, who fails to appreciate Willy's previous sales experience and expertise. Ben, on the other hand, simply abandoned the city, explored the American and African continents, and went to work for himself. As a result, after four years in the jungle, Ben was a rich man at the age of 21, while Willy must struggle to convince Howard to let him work in New York for a reduced salary after working for the company for 34 years. Willy does not envy Ben, but looks to him as model of success.

The play begins and ends in the present, and the plot occurs during the last two days of Willy's life; however, a large portion of the play consists of Willy's fragmented memories, recollections, and re-creations of the past, which are spliced in between scenes taking place in the present. Willy not only remembers an event but also relives it, engaging himself in the situation as if it is happening for the first time. As the play progresses, Willy becomes more irrational and is not able to transition between his memory of the past and the reality of the present.

Willy's memories are the key to understanding his character. He carefully selects memories or re-creates past events in order to devise situations in which he is successful or to justify his current lack of prosperity. For example, Willy recalls Ben and the job he offered to Willy after being fired by Howard. Willy is unable to cope with the idea that he has failed, so he relives Ben's visit. The memory allows Willy to deny the truth and its consequences — facing

Linda and the boys after being fired — and to establish temporary order in his disrupted life. At other times, Willy proudly recalls memories of Biff's last football game because it is more pleasant to re-create the past in which Biff adored him and wanted to score a touchdown in his name, rather than face the present where he is at odds with his own son.

Willy's constant movement from the present to the past results in his contradictory nature. Although he fondly remembers Biff as a teenager, he is unable to communicate with Biff in the present. As a result, he praises Biff in one breath, while criticizing him in the next. The cause of Willy's inconsistent behavior is his unbidden memories of a long-ago affair, which he forgets or chooses not to remember until the end of Act II. It is difficult enough for Willy to deal with Howard, his buyers (or lack of buyers), and the everyday reminders that he is not a great salesman like Dave Singleman; however, it is even more insufferable for Willy to accept the idea that he is a failure in his son's eyes.

Prior to the Boston trip, Biff, more than anyone, sincerely believes in Willy's success, potential, and inevitable greatness. Willy is able to achieve the success and notoriety he desires only through Biff, but this changes when Biff learns of the affair. After the Boston trip, Willy tries to regain the success he once had by focusing on memories or events prior to the discovery of the affair. It is not surprising that Willy contradicts himself when speaking in the present about Biff or to him, for although Willy chooses to remember Biff as he used to be, he cannot eradicate the words Biff spoke to him in Boston: "You fake! You phony little fake!"

Willy perceives himself as a failure: He is not Dave Singleman. He is just a mediocre salesman who has only made monumental sales in his imagination. Now that he is growing old and less productive, the company he helped to build fires him. He regrets being unfaithful to his wife, even though he will never admit the affair to her. He is no longer a respectable man in Biff's eyes. Biff recognizes Willy's tendency to exaggerate or reconstruct reality and is no longer a willing participant in Willy's fantasy. By the end of the play, Willy is overwhelmed; he can no longer deny his failures when they become too many to deal with. Instead, he seeks a solution in suicide. Willy reasons he can finally be a success because his life insurance policy will in some way compensate Linda for his affair. Additionally, Biff will consider him a martyr and respect him after witnessing the large funeral and many mourners Willy is sure will attend.

3.1.2 Biff Loman

Biff is a catalyst. He drives Willy's actions and thoughts, particularly his memories, throughout the play. Whenever Willy is unable to accept the present, he retreats to the past, and Biff is usually there. Prior to his Boston trip, Biff adored Willy. He believed his father's stories and accepted his father's philosophy that a person will be successful, provided that he is "well-liked." Biff never questioned Willy, even when it was obvious that Willy was breaking the rules. As a result, Biff grew up believing that he was not bound by social rules or expectations because Willy did not have to abide by them, nor did Willy expect Biff to. It is not surprising that Biff's penchant for stealing continued throughout his adult life because Willy encouraged Biff's "little thefts" while he was growing up. For example, instead of disciplining Biff for stealing the football, Willy praised his initiative.

Biff's perception of Willy as the ideal father is destroyed after Biff's trip to Boston. Once he learns that Willy is having an affair, Biff rejects Willy and his philosophy. Biff considers Willy to be a "fake," and he no longer believes in, or goes along with, Willy's grand fantasies of success. Instead, Biff despises his father and everything he represents.

Biff's problem lies in the fact that, even though he does not want to associate with Willy, he cannot change the fact that he is his son. And as a result, he cannot change the fact that his father has inevitably affected him. It is true that Biff is not a womanizer like his brother Happy, but he has incorporated Willy's tendency to exaggerate and manipulate reality in his favor. For example, Biff truly believes he was a salesman for Oliver, rather than a shipping clerk. It is only when he confronts Oliver that Biff realizes how wrong he was.

Biff is different from Willy because he does finally accept and embrace the fact that he has been living a lie all of his life. Biff is relieved once he realizes who he is and what he wants, as opposed to who Willy thinks he should be and who Biff needs to pretend to be in order to please him. Once Biff states that "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house," he severs himself from Willy because he openly refuses to live by Willy's philosophy any longer. Ironically, Biff reconciles with Willy almost immediately following this statement. Since he acknowledges that he, too, is a "fake," Biff can no longer hold a grudge against Willy.

3.1.3 Linda Loman

Linda is a woman in an awkward situation. She knows that Willy is suicidal, irrational, and difficult to deal with; however, she goes along with Willy's fantasies in order to protect him from the criticism of others, as well as his own self-criticism. Linda is Willy's champion. She gently prods him when it comes to paying the bills and communicating with Biff, and she does not lose her temper when he becomes irate. Linda knows that Willy is secretly borrowing money from Charley to pay the life insurance and other bills. She has discovered the rubber hose behind the heater and lives in fear that Willy will try to asphyxiate himself. She is also aware that he has attempted to kill himself several times before. Despite all this, Linda does nothing, afraid to aggravate Willy's fragile mental condition. In fact, she even throws Biff and Happy out when their behavior threatens to upset Willy. In many ways Willy is like a small child, and Linda is like a mother who anxiously protects him from Biff, Happy, and the rest of the world.

Linda is a character driven by desperation and fear. Even though Willy is often rude to her and there is the possibility that Linda suspects Willy may have had an affair, she protects him at all costs. According to Linda, Willy is "only a little boat looking for a harbor." She loves Willy, and more importantly, she accepts all of his shortcomings. She would rather play along with his fantasies of grandeur, or the simple ones like building a garden and growing fresh vegetable, than face the possibility of losing him.

3.1.4 Happy Loman

Happy is a young version of Willy. He incorporates his father's habit of manipulating reality in order to create situations that are more favorable to him. Happy grew up listening to Willy embellish the truth, so it is not surprising that Happy exaggerates his position in order to create the illusion of success. Instead of admitting he is an assistant to the assistant, Happy lies and tells everyone he is the assistant buyer. This is Willy's philosophy all over again.

Happy also relishes the fact that "respectable" women cannot resist him. He has seduced the fiancées of three executives just to gain a perception of pleasure and power. He thrives on sexual gratification, but even more than that, Happy savors the knowledge that he has "ruined" women engaged to men he works for and also despises. He states, "I hate myself for it. Because I don't want the girl, and, still, I take it and — I love it!" Happy is similar to Willy in two ways. Both deny their positions and exaggerate details in order to aggrandize themselves, and sexual interludes are the defining moments of both of their lives. Willy's life

revolves around his attempt to forget his affair with the Woman, while Happy's life revolves around an active pursuit of affairs with many women.

3.1.5 Ben Loman

Ben is Willy's adventurous and lucky older brother. Of course, he's dead, so he only appears in the play as a character in Willy's troubled imagination. Willy totally idolizes Ben because he was an adventurer who escaped the world of business and got rich quick by finding diamonds in the African jungle.

One of Willy's lifelong regrets is that he didn't go with his brother to Alaska. Unlike Willy, Ben was able to take a risk and stray from the world of fierce ambition and competition. Willy interprets Ben's good fortune as undeniable proof that his dreams of making it big are realistic.

Willy also associates Ben with knowledge and self-awareness, qualities that he himself is severely lacking. Willy always wants advice, and Ben gives it. Of course, it's frequently not very good advice, and, actually and is usually the product of Willy's own imagination.

In his imagined conversations with his brother, Willy pries him for information about their father, about how he succeeded financially, and for advice about parenting Biff and Happy. It's hard to talk about Ben and his responses to these pleas, since he is either a memory of the past or a figment of the imagination. And, with Willy's complete lack of credibility, it's hard to tell even these apart.

But one thing we can take as true with reasonable confidence is the scene where Ben fights Biff. Ben wins, but only by cheating, informing the boy that that's the only way to win. There's some sketchiness surrounding his success in Africa (we're thinking he wasn't just handed the diamonds and sent along his way). He even says, in Willy's imaginings, "The jungle is dark but full of diamonds." That's big stuff right there.

Considering Ben's self-serving nature and amoral proclivities, the word "dark" connotes more than just shadows under the trees. We're not going so far as to say words like "evil" or "Darth Vader," but Ben's success is certainly blemished by his apparent use of cheating to get what he wants.

3.2 Minor Characters

3.2.1 Charley - Willy's neighbor, a steady businessman. He is a constant friend to Willy through the years, though Willy is quick to take offense whenever Charley tries to bring Willy's unrealistic dreams down to earth. Charley foresees Willy's destruction and tries to save him by offering him a job. He gives the final elegy about what it meant for Willy to live and die as a salesman.

3.2.2 Bernard - Charley's son, he is studious and hardworking. As a boy in high school, he warns Biff not to flunk math, a warning both Biff and Willy ignore. He grows up to be a successful lawyer who is about to argue a case before the Supreme Court.

3.2.3 The Woman - Willy's mistress in Boston, during the time that Biff and Happy were in high school. She is a secretary to one of the buyers, and picked Willy as a lover because, it seems, she is able to exploit him for gifts.

3.2.4 Howard Wagner - Willy's boss and the son of Frank Wagner, who founded the company for which Willy works. A cold, selfish man, he inherits his success without building anything himself. He refuses to take the personal association between Willy and his father into account when he tells Willy there is no place for him at the New York office. He represents the new, impersonal face of the sales business.

3.2.5 Stanley - A waiter at Frank's Chop House, who is friendly with Happy but has sympathy for Willy's plight.

3.2.6 Miss Forsythe - A call girl Biff and Happy met at Frank's Chop House.

3.2.7 Letta - A call girl friend of Miss Forsythe.

3.2.8 Jenny - Charley's secretary.

3.2.9 Bill Oliver - Biff's former boss. Though crucial to the plot, he doesn't appear onstage.

4. Arthur Miller’s contribution to American Literature

As a dramatist, Miller has more in common with Ibsen, Shaw, Chekov, and Brecht than with his fellow American playwrights, Eugene O'Neil or Thornton Wilder. With Ibsen, Shaw, and Chekov, Miller shares in common the philosophy that the fate of a person is social and that the stage should be considered as a medium more important for ideas than for mere

entertainment. As a dramatist, Miller is a moralist, and his plays have a serious intellectual purpose.

The theater of twentieth century America took a long time to come of age. No American dramatist in the early 1900's dared to experiment with subjects, ideas, or production techniques because theatre was regarded as business. Slowly, in response to the plays of European realistic dramatists, American theater began to change. The years between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Depression saw more frequent reflections of economic problems on the American stage. In 1922, Eugene O'Neill's*Hairy Ape* represented the psychological defeat of an uncouth proletarian struggling to adjust himself to a complex economic order which he could not understand. Maxwell Anderson's play *What Price Glory*(1924) dealt with the bitter realities of war and its aftermath.

After World War II, the theatre of social protest fell into disrepute. Senator McCarthy succeeded in suppressing critical dissent and created a climate hostile to the free expression of the artist. During this period, the American theater concentrated on light comedy and lush musicals. Arthur Miller, born in 1915, was a young adult at the time of the suppression of free thinking. He decided to fight McCarthyism and to work for the expression of free ideas in the theatre. He also decided to write plays of social protest. In *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Miller criticizes the falsity of the American Dream and the emphasis placed on financial success in the United States.

5. Questions

1. Discuss Willy Loman as a pathetically tragic figure. What actually overcomes him in life?

2. Which character in the play changes the most? Support your answer with specific detail.

3. What aspects of American society are criticized by Arthur Miller in the play "Death of a Salesman"?

4. How much of Willy's tragedy is caused by his own personality and how much is the result of the American society? Support your answer with details from the play.

5. Compare and contrast Willy, Charley, and Ben.

6. Compare and contrast Happy and Biff.

7. How does the flute music in the play function symbolically?

8. Describe how the structure of the play is made to present illusion and reality?

9. How does Linda as a traditional wife function to keep Willy in a world of illusion?

10. What are Themes or motifs in the play and how are they developed?

6. Further Readings of Arthur Miller

Plays

- *The Crucible*
- *Death of a Salesman*
- *A View from the Bridge*
- *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944).
- *All My Sons* (1947)
- *Death of a Salesman* (1949)
- *An Enemy of the People* (1950)
- *The Crucible* (1953)
- *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955
- *A View from the Bridge* (1956)
- *After The Fall*
- *All My Sons*

- *The Misfits* (1961)

- *After the Fall* (1964)
- *Incident at Vichy* (1964)
- *The Price* (1968)
- *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972).
- *Fame* (1978)
- *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977)
- *Playing For Time* (1980)
- *The American Clock* (1980)
- *Two-Way Mirror*(1982-1984)
- *Danger: Memory* (1987)
- *The Last Yankee* (1991-1993)
- *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991)
- *Broken Glass* (1994)
- *Mr. Peter's Connections* (1998)
- *Resurrection Blues* (2002)
- *Finishing the Picture* (2004)

Fiction

- *Focus* (1945)
- *Homely Girl: A Life and Other Stories* (1992)
- *I Don't Need You Anymore*(1967)
- *Jane's Blanket* (1963)

Non-Fiction

- *Situation Normal* (1944)
- *In Russia* (1969)
- *In the Country* (1977)
- *Chinese Encounters* (1979)
- *"Salesman" in Beijing* (1984)
- *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (1978, updated 1996)
- *Timebends: A Life* (1987)

- *Echoes Down the Corridors: Collected Essays 1944-2000* (2000)

Selected non-dramatic articles/publications by Miller 2000-2005

- A short story titled "Beavers" by Arthur Miller appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, February, 2005: 79-82.
- The novella *The Turpentine Still* appeared in *Southwest Review,* 89.4 (2004): 479-520.
- AUTHORS AGAINST AIDS Woody Allen, Margaret Atwood, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Arthur Miller, Kenzaburo Oe, Amos Oz, Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag and John Updike are among 21 authors who have contributed without fee or royalty to *Telling Tales*, a story collection compiled by Nadine Gordimer, above, the Nobel prize-winning South African author. All proceeds from the sale of the book, to be published by Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux on Dec. 1 to coincide with World AIDS Day, are to be donated to H.I.V./AIDS preventive education and medical treatment for South Africans. Miller's contribution is titled "Bulldog."
- *A Line to Walk On* in *Harper's Magazine,* Nov, 2000. A memoir about several vaudeville people Miller had known.
- A piece by Arthur Miller - a memoir about living in the Chelsea Hotel in the early 60s and his admiration for Brendan Behan - appears in *Granta* magazine.
- A short story titled "The Performance" by Arthur Miller appeared in *New Yorker* April 22/29, 2002, pages 176-88.
- A short story titled "The Bare Manuscript" by Arthur Miller appeared in *New Yorker* December 16, 2002, pages 82-93.
- A short story titled "The Presence" by Arthur Miller appeared in *Esquire* July 2003 pages 106-09.
- A short editorial on the relevance of the current Broadway theater to real life, titled "Spring Theater: Looking for a Conscience" in *New York Times* February 23rd, 2003. (Sunday; 842 words)
- Terry McCoy is the editor of *Cuba on the Verge: an Island in Transition*, to be published by Bulfinch Press, March 2003. The book includes an introduction by William Kennedy, and an epilogue by Arthur Miller, and essays about the contemporary Cuban experience by writers including Russell Banks, Susan Orlean,

Abilio Estévez, and Ana Menéndez. A shortened version of Miller's contribution: "My dinner with Castro" came out January 24 2004.

- "Why Elia should get his Oscar" by Arthur Miller March 6, 1999 at the *Guardian* website

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Unit 2: A Streetcar Named Desire

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

1.2 Biographical sketch of Tennessee Williams

1.3 Major Works of Williams

1.4 Themes and Outlines of Williams' works

1.5 Styles and Techniques used by Williams

1.6 Scene-wise Summary and Analysis

2. Themes, Symbols and Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

2.1 Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

2.2 Themes

2.3 Symbols

3. Character List

3.1 Major Characters

3.2 Minor Characters

4. Tennessee Williams' contribution to American Literature

5. Questions

6. Further readings of Tennessee Williams

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

This unit provides a biographical sketch of Tennessee Williams first. Then a list of his major works, their themes and outlines. It also includes a detailed discussion about the styles and techniques used by him. The themes, symbols and the structure of *A Streetcar named Desire* are discussed next, followed by the list of major as well as minor characters. This unit concludes with a discussion about Williams' contribution to American literature and a set of questions. Lastly there is a list of further readings of Tennessee Williams to gain knowledge about the critical aspects of the play.

1.2 Biographical Sketch of Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. The second of three children, his family life was full of tension. His parents, a shoe salesman and the daughter of a minister, often engaged in violent arguments that frightened his sister Rose.

In 1927, Williams got his first taste of literary fame when he took third place in a national essay contest sponsored by *The Smart Set* magazine. In 1929, he was admitted to the University of Missouri where he saw a production of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and decided to become a playwright. But his degree was interrupted when his father forced him to withdraw from college and work at the International Shoe Company. There he worked with a young man named Stanley Kowalski who would later resurface as a character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Eventually, Tom returned to school. In 1937, he had two of his plays (*Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*) produced by Mummers of St. Louis, and in 1938, he graduated from the University of Iowa. After failing to find work in Chicago, he moved to New Orleans and changed his name from "Tom" to "Tennessee" which was the state of his father's birth.

In 1939, the young playwright received a $1,000 Rockefeller Grant, and a year later, *Battle of Angels* was produced in Boston. In 1944, what many consider to be his best play, *The Glass Menagerie*, had a very successful run in Chicago and a year later burst its way onto Broadway. The play tells the story of Tom, his disabled sister, Laura, and their controlling mother Amanda who tries to make a match between Laura and the gentleman caller. Many

people believe that Tennessee used his own familial relationships as inspiration for the play. His own mother, who is often compared to the controlling Amanda, allowed doctors to perform a frontal lobotomy on Tennessee's sister Rose, an event that greatly disturbed Williams who cared for Rose throughout much of her adult life. Elia Kazan (who directed many of Williams' greatests successes) said of Tennessee: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life." *The Glass Menagerie* won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play of the season.

Williams followed up his first major critical success with several other Broadway hits including such plays as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, *A Rose Tattoo*, and *Camino Real*. He received his first Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and reached an even larger world-wide audience in 1950 and 1951 when *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were made into major motion pictures. Later plays which were also made into motion pictures include *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (for which he earned a second Pulitzer Prize in 1955), *Orpheus Descending*, and *Night of the Iguana*.

Tennessee Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo in 1947 while living in New Orleans. Merlo, a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the U.S. Navy in World War II, was a steadying influence in Williams' chaotic life. But in 1961, Merlo died of Lung Cancer and the playwright went into a deep depression that lasted for ten years. In fact, Williams struggled with depression throughout most of his life and lived with the constant fear that he would go insane as did his sister Rose. For much of this period, he battled addictions to prescription drugs and alcohol.

On February 24, 1983, Tennessee Williams choked to death on a bottle cap at his New York City residence at the Hotel Elysee. He is buried in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to twenty-five full length plays, Williams produced dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one-hundred poems and an autobiography. Among his many awards, he won two Pulitzer Prizes and four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards.

1.3 Major works of Williams

-Baby Doll & Tiger Tail

-Battle of Angels

-Camino Real

-Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

-Clothes for a Summer Hotel

-Dragon Country: A Book of Plays

-Eccentricities of a Nightingale

-The Glass Menagerie

-The Gnadiges Fraulein

-In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel

-I Rise in Flame Cried the Phoenix

-Kingdom of Earth

-A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur

-The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore

-The Mutilated

-Night of the Iguana

-Not About Nightingales

-The Notebook of Trigorin

-A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot

-Period of Adjustment

-The Red Devil Battery Sign

-The Rose Tatoo

-*Small Craft Warnings*

-*Something Cloudy, Something Clear*

-*A Streetcar Named Desire*

-*Suddenly Last Summer*

-*Summer and Smoke*

-*Sweet Bird of Youth*

-*27 Wagons Full of Cotton*

-*Two-Character Play*

-*Vieux Carre*

1.4 Themes and Outlines of Williams' works

A gifted writer and recipient of many literary awards, Tennessee Williams is now recognized as an innovator of the new American drama after the end of World War II. Many of his plays have shocked audiences; they display violence, sexuality, alcoholism, rape, homosexuality, and fetishism in terms that were never before seen on the American stage. His pervasive theme is the inescapable loneliness of human condition. His characters are faded men and women, consumed by time and decay. The playwrigh presents before us the dark world of one-dimensional society of the modern civilization that survives in the midst of exploitation, violation of moral code of conduct, corruption and dehumanized passions of power and intimate relationships. He makes us realize that such worldly circumstances of the tainted world drives the misfits, the rebels, the artists and the fugitives to lead lives of depression, alienation and unhappy madness. It happens due to their failure of adjustment with the worldly norms and they construct make-believe worlds around them through fabricated illusions. Tennessee Williams derives his themes from psychoanalysis, conferred upon American drama by the influence of Freud's theories. In his plays, sex, which was considered a taboo, is treated in a shocking and revolutionary manner. He generated the germ of the new spirit of freedom for woman to find sexual fulfillment (symbolized by the West) and this idea is in conflict with the moral Puritanism of New England.

The characters in Tennessee Williams's plays attempt to create an aura of illusions in order to either forget the unpleasant reality of human existence or to avoid certain experiences of the past. Sometimes they are also fed up with this material life and the worldly-wise people that inhabit it. Such illusions serve as an escape for them and also enable them to remain disguised in a make-believer world.

1.5 Styles and Techniques used by Williams

Williams drew from the experiences of his persona. He saw himself as a shy, sensitive, gifted man trapped in a world where "mendacity" replaced communication, brute violence replaced love, and loneliness was, all too often, the standard human condition. He developed a precise naturalism and continued to work toward a "fusion of naturalistic detail with symbolism and poetic sensibility rare in American playwriting." The result was a unique romanticism which is not pale or scented but earthy and robust, the product of a mind vitally infected with the rhythms of human speech." Some of his contemporaries—Arthur Miller notably—responded to the modern condition with social protest, but Williams, after a few early attempts at that genre, chose another approach. Williams chose to present characters full of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Like that of most Southern writers, Williams's work exhibits an abiding concern with time and place and how they affect men and women. Like that of most Southern writers, Williams's work exhibits an abiding concern with time and place and how they affect men and women. His characters are haunted by a past that they have difficulty accepting or that they valiantly endeavor to transform into myth. Interested in yesterday or tomorrow rather than in today, painfully conscious of the physical and emotional scars the years inflict, they have a static, dreamlike quality Williams's South provided not only settings but other characteristics of his work—romanticism; a myth of an Arcadian existence now disappeared; a distinctive way of looking at life, including both an inbred Calvinistic belief in the reality of evil eternally at war with good. The South also inspired Williams's fascination with violence, his drawing upon regional character types, and his skill in recording Southern language—eloquent, flowery, and sometimes bombastic.

Another major area of contention is Williams' use of symbols, which he called "the natural language of drama." Laura's glass animals, the paper lantern and cathedral bells in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the legless birds of *Orpheus Descending*, and the iguana in *The Night of the Iguana*, to name only a few, are integral to the plays in which they appear. Williams's extensive use of animal images in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to symbolize the fact that

all the Pollitts, "grasping, screeching, devouring," are "greedily alive." In that play, Big Daddy's malignancy effectively represents the corruption in the family and in the larger society to which the characters belong. He, like *The Glass Menagerie* 's Tom, had "a poet's weakness for symbols," which can get out of hand; like it did in *Suddenly Last Summer,* Violet Venable's garden does not grow out of the situation and enrich the play. Sometimes a certain weakness of symbolism "is built into the fabric of the drama."

Critics have agreed that one of his virtues lay in his characterization, his ability to find "extraordinary spiritual significance in ordinary people." they admired Williams's "Southern grotesques" and his knack for giving them "dignity,"

Whatever the final judgment of literary historians on the works of Tennessee Williams, certain facts are clear. He is also the most quotable of American playwrights, and even those who disparage the highly poetic dialogue admit the uniqueness of the language he brought to modern theater. In addition, Williams has added to dramatic literature a cast of remarkable, memorable characters and has turned his attention and sympathy toward people and subjects that, before his time, had been considered beneath the concern of serious authors.

1.6 Scene-wise Summary of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Summary and Analysis scene 1

Summary

Stanley appears and calls for Stella, his wife, to catch a package of meat. He then goes bowling and Stella follows. Almost immediately, Blanche appears trying to find a certain street number. Eunice, the neighbor, sees that Blanche is confused and assures her that this is the place where Stella lives. Eunice lets Blanche into the apartment and goes after Stella. Immediately, Blanche finds a bottle of whiskey and gulps down a big swig.

When Stella arrives, Blanche blurts out how awful the apartment is but then tries to laugh off her comment. She asks for a drink in order to restore her nerves. Blanche then returns to the subject of the apartment, wondering how Stella could live in such a place. Stella tries to explain that New Orleans is different and that the apartment is not so bad. Blanche promises to say no more about it.

Blanche explains to Stella that she had to resign from her high school teaching position because of her nerves. It was so sudden that she wasn't able to let Stella know about it. Blanche notices that the apartment has only two rooms and she wonders where she will sleep. Stella shows her the folding bed and explains that Stanley won't mind the lack of privacy because he is Polish. And Stella warns Blanche that Stanley's friends are not the type Blanche is accustomed to.

Blanche emphasizes that she must stay for a while because she can't stand to be alone. This leads Blanche to tell Stella that Belle Reve, the ancestral home, has been lost. When Stella asks how it happened, Blanche reminds Stella how there has been a long line of deaths in the family and that she had to stay there and fight while Stella was "in bed with your — Polack." When Stella begins crying and goes to the bathroom, Blanche hears Stanley outside. Blanche introduces herself to him. Stanley takes off his shirt so as to be comfortable and offers Blanche a drink but Blanche says that she rarely touches it. Stanley asks Blanche if she wasn't once married. Blanche tells him yes, but the boy died; then, she leaves thinking that she is going to be sick.

Analysis

The first part of this scene introduces us symbolically to the essential characteristics of Stanley Kowalski. He enters in a loud-colored bowling jacket and work clothes and is carrying "a red-stained package." He bellows to Stella and throws her the raw meat which she catches as she laughs breathlessly. The neighbors laugh over the package of bloody meat — an obvious sexual symbol which depicts Stanley in the same way as Blanche later describes him to Stella: He is a "survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle; and you — you here — waiting for him." This scene, therefore, shows Stanley as the crude and uncouth man. The scene also sets a tone of commonplace brutality and reality into which the delicate and sensitive Blanche is about to appear.

Williams is overly fond of using Freudian sexual symbols. Readers should be aware of these and choose their own responses. Aside from the use of the raw meat, he uses the bowling balls and pins, and the columns of the Belle Reve plantation home as obvious, overt phallic and sexual symbols. The fact that Stanley bowls suggests symbolically his characteristic of summing everything up in terms of sexuality.

When Blanche says that she took a "streetcar named Desire, and then . . . one called Cemeteries," Williams seems to be implying that desire leads to death which is then an escape to the Elysian Fields. But ironically, in terms of the play, the streetcar leads her to the French Quarter which is certainly no Elysian Fields.

Notice that Blanche is described as wearing white and having a mothlike appearance. Williams often dresses his most degenerate characters in white, the symbol of purity. (For example, aside from Blanche, Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer* are always dressed in white.) Blanche's dress hides her inner sins and contributes to her mothlike appearance. Her actions also suggest the fluttering of a delicate moth. And as a moth is often attracted by light and consequently killed by the heat, later we will see that Blanche is afraid of the light and when Mitch forces her under the light, this act begins Blanche's destruction.

Note the symbolic use of names throughout the play. Blanche DuBois means white of the woods. The white is a play on Blanche's supposed innocence and the woods are used as another Freudian phallic symbol. Stella's name means star. The name of the plantation home was Belle Reve or beautiful dream — thus the loss of Belle Reve is correlated with the loss of a beautiful dream that Blanche once possessed.

In the first meeting between Stella and Blanche, Blanche tells Stella to "turn that over-light off!" This is a first reference to Blanche's aversion to too much light. It correlates with her moth-like appearance and will later develop into one of the controlling motifs throughout the play. Her fear of light will be seen to be connected with the death of her first husband and her fear of being too closely examined in the cold, hard world of reality. She prefers, instead, the dim, illusionary world of semi-darkness.

A key to Blanche's character is given to us in this first scene by her reliance upon and need for whiskey. Then later when Stanley asks her if she wants a drink, she tells him that she rarely touches it. Here then is an example of Blanche's inability to tell the truth and her desire to be something different from what she actually is.

Blanche's emphasis that she can't be alone suggests that she is at a point of desperation at the opening of the play. She has absolutely no place to go and no one to turn to or else she would not be here in these surroundings. Her explanation of how Belle Reve was lost and her

recounting her frequent encounters with death serve in some ways to account for Blanche's present neurotic state.

The reader should be especially aware of Williams' description of Stanley. "Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements." This is the opposite of the delicate and ethereal Blanche. Furthermore, the "center of his life has been pleasure with women." He is the "emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer." He takes pride in everything that is *his.* Thus part of the later conflict is that Blanche can never in any sense of the word be*his.* She lives in his house, eats his food, drinks his liquor, criticizes his life, and so forth, but she is never his. Blanche's refusal will later help us understand the reasons for the brutal rape.

Essentially, the play can be read as a series of encounters between the Kowalski world and the Blanche DuBois world. Each of these encounters will intensify with each subsequent meeting. The first encounter occurs at the end of Scene 1. The overly sensitive Blanche must introduce herself to Stanley, who immediately offers her a drink after he notices that the bottle has been touched. He takes off his shirt and makes a shady remark to Stella, who is in the bathroom. He then asks Blanche some pointed questions which end with an inquiry about her earlier marriage. By the end of the first encounter, Blanche is feeling sick. Thus, Stanley's rough, common, brutal questions end by hitting on the most sensitive aspect of Blanche's past life — her marriage with the young boy. Stanley's animalism almost destroys Blanche's sensibilities even in this first meeting. Thus the conflict is between the oversensitive aristocratic world of Blanche and the brutal, realistic, present-day world represented by Stanley. But as an afternote, it should be added that Stanley is the type of person who likes his "cards on the table." He doesn't go in for subtleties and deception; thus, had Blanche been honest about his liquor, perhaps they could have gotten off to a better start.

Summary and Analysis Scene 2

Summary

Stella tells Stanley that she is taking Blanche out for dinner and a show while he has his poker game at the apartment. He is annoyed because he has to eat a cold plate which Stella placed in the ice box. She tells him that they have lost Belle Reve and that Blanche is upset and it would help if Stanley could admire Blanche's dress. But Stanley wants to return to the loss of Belle Reve. He wants to see a bill of sale or some papers. He reminds Stella of the Napoleonic Code which states that anything belonging to the wife belongs also to the

husband. Thus if the wife is swindled, then the husband is swindled and Stanley does not like to be swindled. Stanley looks at all the furs and jewelry Blanche has brought with her and demands to know where the money came from to buy these. Stella tries to explain that it is all just artificial stuff and very cheap. But Stanley is going to have a friend evaluate it all. Stella goes out on the porch so as to end the discussion.

When Blanche comes from her hot bath, she asks Stanley to button her and to give her a drag on his cigarette. He begins to question her about the clothes and Blanche begins fishing for a compliment from him about her looks. He tells her that he doesn't go in for that sort of thing and only likes people who "lay their cards on the table." Stella tries to stop the discussion, but Blanche sends her out after a coke. Then Stanley asks her about the loss of Belle Reve. Blanche explains that she knows she fibs a lot, because "after all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion," but when something is important she always tells the truth. Stanley asks her for the papers. She goes to the trunk and hands him a tin box. He wants to know what the other papers are and at the same time snatches them. Blanche tells him that they are love letters and the touch of his hands insults them. She then gives him the papers from many firms which had made loans on the plantation and comments that it is fitting all these old papers should now be in his hands. He takes the papers and tries to justify his suspicion by saying he has to be careful now that Stella is going to have a baby. When Stella returns, Blanche tells her how happy she is about the baby and how well she handled Stanley and that she even flirted with him. They leave as the poker players begin to arrive.

Analysis

The first part of this scene introduces us to the motif of Blanche's baths. She bathes constantly so as to soothe her nerves. But this is also a cleansing symbol. By her baths, she subconsciously hopes to cleanse her sins away. The baths are also another quirk which annoys Stanley since the hot baths make the apartment even hotter.

Note the open and flagrant manner in which Blanche flirts with Stanley. Again the buttons, the request for a drag on his cigarette, and the trunk function as favorite Freudian symbols. Here they are used to reinforce the idea that Blanche is attempting symbolically to seduce Stanley. She is so open about it that Stanley says, "If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you." This scene therefore balances with the later scene when Stanley rapes Blanche.

Blanche's attempt to flirt with Stanley is her only known way of achieving success with men. She tries to use her charms. Actually, she wants Stanley to admire her and willingly commits a breach of decorum when she attempts this symbolic seduction.

This second scene presents the second encounter between the Stanley and Blanche worlds. Here even Blanche recognizes that Stanley's world is destructive to people like her. She says of her husband: "I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can't." But in actuality, Stanley will be able to destroy her rather easily. Blanche also recognizes the difference between the two worlds when she presents Stanley the collected papers of Belle Reve and thinks that it is fitting their papers for the aristocratic home should now be in his brutal hands. At the end of the encounter, it is Blanche who is left trembling and shaken by the encounter.

Summary and Analysis Scene 3

Summary

Later that night Mitch, Stanley's friend, wants to drop out of the poker game because his mother is sick. Stella and Blanche return from the show, and Blanche is introduced to the other players. When Stanley tells the ladies to disappear until the game is finished, Stella reminds him that it is 2:30 A.M. and time to quit. Stanley swats her rear and the sisters go into the other room, where Blanche meets Harold Mitchell coming from the bathroom. When he leaves, Blanche thinks that he looks more sensitive than the others and is told that Mitch's mother is very sick. Blanche begins to undress until Stella reminds her that she is in the light. The sisters begin to laugh, and Stanley yells to them to be quiet.

When Stella goes to the bathroom, Blanche moves back into the light and continues to undress as she listens to rumba music over the radio. Stanley calls for her to turn the radio off. Mitch excuses himself again and goes into the other room, where he meets Blanche again. She asks him for a cigarette, and he shows her his cigarette case with an inscription on it. Blanche recognizes the inscription and Mitch is pleased and explains that there is a story connected with the case. It was given to him by a girl who was dying and knew it when she gave him the present. Blanche explains that people who suffer are often more sensitive and sincere than the average person. Blanche asks Mitch to cover the light bulb with a paper lantern because she can't "stand a naked light bulb, any more than a rude remark or a vulgar action." After more conversation, Blanche explains how she tried to teach English and an

appreciation for literature to youngsters who were not interested in it. As Stella comes out of the bathroom, Blanche turns on the radio and begins a little waltz, and Mitch clumsily tries to follow when suddenly Stanley charges into the room and throws the radio out the window. Stella screams at him and tells everyone to go home. Stanley becomes enraged and hits Stella. The men pin Stanley down while the women leave. They force him under the shower and then leave.

Stanley emerges and calls Eunice and asks to speak to Stella. He threatens to keep on calling until he talks with Stella. Then he goes outside and bellows for her. Eunice comes out and tells him to be quiet because Stella is not coming down. He continues to yell for her, and Stella emerges from the apartment and comes slowly to him. He falls to his knees and presses her against him. He then carries her back into the apartment. Blanche comes looking for Stella. She sees Mitch who explains that Stella went back to him. Mitch assures her that all is fine now. Blanche looks at him and thanks him for being so kind.

Analysis

Note that the scene is set against a pretty wild poker game. Stanley is especially out of patience because he has been losing heavily. And we see Mitch immediately as a contrast to the others, especially with his concern for his sick mother.

Blanche is immediately aware of Mitch's difference. Her own sensitivity allows her to recognize it in others. This is a quality that Stanley does not possess.

Blanche intentionally moves into the light when she is undressing so as to be noticed. This is a manifestation of Blanche's desire to be the center of attention, and her use of her body to attract attention prepares us for some of her later lurid escapades.

Notice that Blanche's and Mitch's pasts curiously correspond since both have lost a loved person. This is just one of many aspects that will draw them together.

Again the light motif is here developed. Blanche asks Mitch to cover the naked light bulb. Ironically, it will be he who will later tear off the paper lantern in order to "get a better look" at Blanche.

The reader should be aware of Blanche's almost pathological need to lie. She lies to Mitch about her reason for visiting Stella and about her age. But as Blanche will later say, these are only little illusions that a woman must create.

This is the third confrontation between Blanche and Stanley. Here Blanche is the witness to the animal brutality and the coarse behavior of Stanley. The violence that he perpetrates is totally alien to Blanche's understanding. But more amazing to Blanche is the fact that Stella returns to Stanley after the fight is over.

In Stella's return to Stanley when he calls for her, we see the basis on which their marriage is built. In earlier scenes it was intimated that there could be no similar traits between them. Here it becomes apparent that the basic attraction is one of pure physical sexual attractions as they "come together with low, animal moans."

What is often overlooked in this scene is the basic cause of this scene. To project, one must ask himself, would this outburst have occurred if Blanche had not been visiting there. It is apparent that Blanche's presence was the principal cause of the violence. And later it will be developed that Stanley feels her presence is an actual threat to his marriage.

The attraction between Mitch and Blanche contrasts aptly to the bestial attraction between Stanley and Stella. The sensitivity and the quietness of Blanche and Mitch emphasize the delicate basis of their relationship.

Summary and Analysis Scene 4

Summary

The following morning, Blanche comes hesitantly and frightenedly to the Kowalski apartment and when she sees Stella alone, she rushes to her and embraces her. Stella tells Blanche to stop being so excitable. Blanche cannot understand how Stella could have returned to Stanley last night. Stella assures her that he was tame as a lamb. She tries to convince Blanche that she is quite content and happy in her present situation. Blanche ignores her and tries to think of some way of getting them out of the situation even though Stella repeatedly says she doesn't want out. Blanche remembers an old boy friend named Shep Huntleigh. She plans to contact him to see if he can help her out of her situation. She tells Stella that she has only sixty-five cents to her name, but she feels that after what happened

last night she can't live under the same roof with Stanley: Stella tries to explain that Stanley was at his worst last night.

Through all of Blanche's attacks, Stella remains calm and simply asserts that she loves Stanley. Then Blanche asks if she may speak plainly. At this moment, Stanley enters the room unheard by Blanche and Stella, and he overhears Blanche's comments. Blanche says that Stanley is common and bestial. He has animal habits and is a "survivor of the Stone Age." She pleads with Stella to remember some of the advances of civilization and not to "hang back with the brutes." At this point, Stanley leaves quietly and calls from outside. When he comes in, Stella throws herself into his arms.

Analysis

This scene points up Blanche as the definite outsider. In attempting to get Stella to see Stanley as a common and bestial person, she succeeds only in alienating herself from Stella.

Blanche begins to feel her desperate situation. Here she first conceives of contacting her old acquaintance, Shep Huntleigh, who will develop as a symbol of her potential escape from this world.

Blanche's view of Stanley, that he is common and bestial — a survivor of the stone age bearing home the raw meat from the kill — does characterize the essential nature of Stanley. It should be remembered that the first scene showed Stanley bringing home a package of raw meat and tossing it to Stella. And Blanche's description also serves to illustrate how utterly different he is from the type of man Blanche has known.

This scene does not give us a direct confrontation between Blanche and Stanley, but instead and equally important, there is a confrontation between the two concepts of life represented by Stanley and Blanche. And at the end of the scene when Stella throws herself at Stanley, it is an obvious victory for Stanley.

Even though Stanley feels victorious in this encounter, we must remember that he has overheard himself referred to as common, bestial, and vulgar. Blanche has called him a *savage* and a brute. This has occurred in *his* own home. Therefore, his resentment of Blanche and desire to be rid of her is quite justifiable. Later when he rapes her, the rape will be partially motivated by his resentment of her attitude toward him.

Summary and Analysis Scene 5

Summary

Blanche has been visiting now for three months. She has just finished composing a letter to Shep Huntleigh pretending that she has been on a round of teas and cocktail parties. Stanley comes in and is apparently irritated. He is antagonistic toward Blanche. When he goes about slamming drawers, she asks him what astrological sign he was born under. We find out that Stanley was born under the sign of Capricorn (the Goat) and Blanche was born under Virgo (the Virgin). Stanley laughs contemptuously when he hears this and then abruptly asks her about a man named Shaw who had known Blanche in a Hotel Flamingo. Blanche asserts that the Flamingo is not the sort of place where she would be seen. Stanley says that he will have this man check it out and "clear up any mistake." At this point Blanche is about ready to faint. Stanley leaves to go bowling after refusing to kiss Stella in front of Blanche.

Immediately, Blanche wonders if Stella has heard some unkind gossip about her. Blanche explains that in the last few years after she began to lose Belle Reve she was too soft and was not strong enough, and there were some stories spread around about her. Stella brings her a coke and tells her to quit talking morbidly. Blanche promises to leave before Stanley pitches her out, but by now she is shaking so badly that the coke foams and spills on her dress. She screams piercingly and Stella wonders why. Blanche explains that she is nervous because Mitch is coming for her at seven. She tells Stella that she has created an illusion with Mitch that she is all prim and proper. She has also lied about her age because she wants Mitch to want her. Stella asks if Blanche is interested in Mitch. She tells Stella that she wants to rest and that she does want Mitch. Stanley calls for Stella and as she is leaving, she assures Blanche that her wish for Mitch will come true, but that Blanche should not drink any more.

In a few minutes, a young man comes to the door. He is collecting for the paper. He is about to leave when Blanche tells him that she has no money, but she calls him back and asks for a light. Then she asks him about the rain and what he did when it rained. He told her that he went in the drug store and had a cherry soda. He tries to leave again but Blanche stops him, telling him how handsome he looks and then she walks over and kisses him softly on the lips. She then sends him away, saying that she must keep her hands off children. A few minutes later Mitch appears with a bunch of roses.

Analysis

Note that as soon as Blanche says that she was born under the sign of the virgin, Stanley chooses this moment to ask her about the man named Shaw. Blanche becomes visibly agitated during the cross-examination. At the end, when Stanley leaves, she is trembling and in need of a drink. This, then, is Blanche's past life beginning to close in upon her. This is also the beginning of Stanley's plan to destroy Blanche, and she feels herself being trapped. Thus in this encounter between Blanche and Stanley, Blanche is seeing her own valued world disintegrate under the force of Stanley's attack.

This scene also illustrates Williams' fondness for the use of symbols. The astrological signs, the spilled coke on Blanche's white dress, and the cherry soda that the young man mentions are all used as slightly suggestive symbols.

At this point in the drama, the scene with the young boy might seem puzzlingly out of place. It is not until later that we learn Blanche had once married a young boy and had been terribly cruel to him when he most needed her. Therefore, her sexual promiscuity returns to her guilt feelings over her failure to help her young husband. She seeks to relive the past and longs for a young lover to replace the young husband who shot himself. In other words, since she once denied help to her young husband, she now tries to compensate by giving herself to almost anyone.

Summary and Analysis Scene 6

Summary

Later that same evening, Blanche and Mitch are returning rather late from a date. They are discussing the failure of the evening. Blanche takes the blame for the failure because she feels that it is the lady's duty to "entertain the gentleman." After Blanche tells Mitch that she must soon pack her trunks, he asks her permission to kiss her goodnight. Blanche tells him he should not have to ask, but warns him that he is to go no further because a single girl has to be so careful.

Stanley and Stella are not at home and Blanche asks Mitch to come in for a nightcap. While Blanche is looking for some whiskey, she lights a candle and says in French that she is the lady of the camellias. When Mitch says he does not understand French, Blanche asks him in French if he would like to sleep with her and then says in English that it's a damned good thing that he doesn't understand French. She asks him to take off his coat, but he is ashamed

of the way he sweats. He tells her how heavy he is and how easily he sweats, but Blanche maintains that he is just a good healthy man.

Mitch asks where Stella and Stanley are. He then suggests that the four of them should go out together sometime; Blanche explains how much Stanley hates her and wonders if he has told Mitch anything. Mitch pretends that he hasn't, but Blanche feels uneasy. She explains how rude and common he is to her and that as soon as Stella has the baby, she is going to leave. Blanche is convinced that Stanley hates her, and that "that man will destroy me."

Mitch suddenly asks Blanche how old she is. Blanche wonders why, and Mitch tells her that he has talked about her to his mother. Blanche wonders if Mitch won't be very lonely when he loses his mother. She explains that she knows what loneliness is because she once lost a person she loved. He was just a boy when they married, and he had a softness and tenderness which she did not fully understand. Then she found out that the boy she had married was also having an affair with an older man. She found out by coming into the room where they were. Pretending nothing had happened, the three of them went to a dance, where suddenly Blanche told her young husband that he disgusted her. He ran from her and immediately shot himself. Since that time, there has been no light in her life stronger than the kitchen candle.

Mitch responds that she needs somebody and that he does too. Thus as the polka tune which has been playing in Blanche's mind during her narration stops, she and Mitch embrace.

Analysis

This scene presents the hope, the sense of salvation for Blanche. It follows the tradition of classical tragedy in the way that a classical tragedy always allows for the possibility of redemption sometime in the middle of the play. Blanche's hope lies with her capturing Mitch, and it will later be Stanley's revelation about Blanche's past to Mitch which finally destroys all of Blanche's hopes. But here in this scene, it seems as though Blanche may succeed in freeing herself from her trapped situation.

An important question is, which is the real Blanche? Is she the innocent, naive girl that she presents to Mitch or is she the depraved woman whose past Stanley uncovers and reveals? Actually, she would like to be the girl she is presenting to Mitch. Ideally, she pictures herself as this girl. Even though this is a pose for her, she feels that it is the pose that she, as the

southern belle, must take. Like Amanda Wingfield in*The Glass Menagerie*, she feels it is her duty to entertain the man and to make the man feel welcomed.

When Mitch discusses his excessive weight, his sweating, and his clumsiness, we must see Mitch as a rough sort of man. He is no diamond in the raw. In other words, he is Blanche's last chance. He is the last straw which she is grasping for so as to keep from drowning.

This scene also shows that Blanche realizes Stanley is her "executioner." "That man will destroy me, unless" — the "unless" refers to her hope of marrying Mitch. But here she recognizes that Stanley is deliberately trying to destroy her, and she can't do much about it.

In Blanche's narration of her tragic marriage with the young Allan, we see the source of all the rest of her difficulties. Here was the man whom she loved "unendurable" but whom she was unable to help. Her love came like a "blinding light" and after his death, she has never had a light "that's stronger than this — kitchen — candle!" Thus, Blanche's aversion to lights, seen in earlier parts of the play relates both to her attempt to disguise her age, and more important to the images connected with her young husband.

We now find out why the Varsouviana music has been playing as background music. This was the song which played while Blanche and her young husband were dancing, and the same song, running through her mind is interrupted by the sound of her husband's gunshot. So now when Blanche hears the music, she must drink until she hears the gunshot which signals the end of the song.

Centrally, this scene reveals both Blanche and Mitch to be very lonesome people who could possibly find happiness with each other. Each could fill some type of vacancy for the other. Thus the scene ends on a note of hope for both characters.

Summary and Analysis Scene 7

Summary

A few weeks later, Stanley comes home to find that Blanche is soaking in a hot tub, even though it is blistering hot outside. It is Blanche's birthday and Stella has prepared a small party. Stanley makes Stella stop working and listen to him. He has found out something about Blanche. While Blanche is singing "It's Only a Paper Moon," Stanley reveals that Blanche has a notorious reputation in Laurel. She was so wild that the low-class Flamingo Hotel asked

her to move out. The army camp close by referred to Blanche as "out-of-bounds" and she was kicked out of her job for being mixed up with a seventeen-year-old boy. Blanche interrupts the conversation by calling for a towel. She notices a strange expression on Stella's face, but Stella assures her that all is well. Stella returns to Stanley and tries to explain that Blanche's early life was fraught with tragedy due to the young boy she had married and that Blanche was never able to recover completely. Stanley isn't interested in such "old history"; he is concerned only with the present.

When Stanley notices the birthday cake, he wonders if company is expected. Stella tells him that Mitch is invited over. Stanley explains that Mitch won't be there tonight because Mitch is an old friend of his and he had to tell Mitch everything that he had found out about Blanche. Stella is shocked and cries out that Blanche thought Mitch was going to marry her. Stanley corrects her by informing her that Mitch is not necessarily *through* with Blanche but he certainly *isn't* going to marry her. He also says that he has bought Blanche a bus ticket for next Tuesday and that she has to leave them. Stella protests, but Stanley is firm. He thinks that Blanche's future is "mapped out for her." He then screams for Blanche to come out of the bathroom so he can get in. When Blanche emerges, she notices that something has happened and is frightened.

Analysis

As Blanche is in the bathroom bathing and singing about the paper moon and make-believe world, the realistic Stanley comes home with a complete case against Blanche. He has collected all the facts and has assembled a list of all the lies that she has told him. Stanley is now ready for his final confrontation with Blanche. He now has all the information he needs to prove again his superiority over her.

Stanley's actions, it must be remembered, stem from several motivations. Most important, Blanche has represented a threat to his marriage. His marital life has not been the same since the arrival of Blanche, and Stanley feels this. Secondly, he is tired of being referred to as vulgar and common. Even if he is vulgar, he feels that his life cannot hold a candle to the type of life Blanche has been leading. Thus he will reestablish his own sense of importance only by proving how degenerate Blanche actually is. Lastly, Stanley is a person who cannot tolerate illusion or make-believe. He is the realist and must have "his cards on the table." Thus, he must, according to his nature, destroy all the illusions Blanche has been creating.

Stanley does not have the sensibility to realize that perhaps Blanche and Mitch could have had a successful marriage in spite of Blanche's past. Instead, he feels some manly obligation to inform Mitch of Blanche's past life. And not only does he tell Mitch, but he buys a bus ticket for Blanche back to Laurel. Note that he could have bought a ticket to another town, but he cruelly buys one that sends her back to the scene of her last failure and the one place where she cannot possibly return.

It is ironic that Blanche is bathing (again symbolic of a cleansing ritual) while all the past that she is trying to wash away is about to be revealed by Stanley.

Summary and Analysis Scene 8

Summary

A short time later that evening, Blanche, Stella, and Stanley are finishing with Blanche's birthday party. She cannot understand why Mitch has not shown up. She tries to tell a joke, but no one laughs. Stella says that Stanley is "too busy making a pig of himself" and tells him to go wash and help her clear the table. Stanley explodes in anger, throws his plate to the floor, and warns Stella never to use such words to him again, that he is "king around here." As he leaves, Blanche demands to know what has happened. She plans on calling Mitch, but Stella asks her not to. She calls anyway, but Mitch is not at home. Stella prepares to light the birthday candles, while Stanley is complaining about the steam from the bath. The phone rings and when Stanley returns from answering it, he tells Blanche that he has a birthday gift for her. She is surprised and happy until she opens it and sees the bus ticket back to Laurel on Tuesday's bus. The polka music begins to play as Blanche is unable to do anything except flee from the room.

Stella doesn't understand why Stanley treated Blanche so brutally, especially since Blanche is so tender and delicate. In the light of Blanche's past experiences, Stanley refuses to believe that she is very delicate. Stella insists upon an explanation. Stanley reminds her that he was common when they first met and she loved it, especially at nights. And he tells Stella that they will be happy again after Blanche leaves. Suddenly Stella tells Stanley to take her to the hospital.

Analysis

Scene 8 is the scene of violence. It begins with a small birthday party for Blanche, but as Blanche waits for Mitch to arrive, Stanley and Stella know that he is not coming. Thus there is a tension in the air which explodes when Stella tells Stanley that he is making a pig of himself and that he should wash and help her clear the table. Stanley violently throws his dishes away and then announces that he is king here.

In actuality, we see in this scene that Blanche's presence is actually destroying Stanley and Stella's marriage. This type of scene would probably never have occurred if Blanche had not moved in; therefore, Stanley *is* fighting for his marriage.

Stanley receives his revenge in full measure when he presents the return ticket to Blanche. The Varsouviana music begins again when Blanche sees the ticket. The music reinforces her predicament here, and the audience realizes that she is now on the verge of being trapped in a situation which will equal the death of her young husband.

According to Stella, whom we must believe, Blanche was once "tender and trusting" but people abused her. Thus perhaps she has always been the type who was unfit for the world of reality.

Stanley's last remarks make it apparent that before the arrival of Blanche, things were going fine between them. We see here that part of his revenge stems from the fact that Blanche has called him dirty, a pig, ape, and similar names.

Summary and Analysis Scene 9

Summary

Later that evening, Blanche is alone in the apartment. The doorbell startles her. It is Mitch, who is still dressed in his working clothes and who is unshaven. Blanche pretends surprise but says she is glad to see him because he has stopped the polka music that was spinning in her head. She looks for a drink to offer him, but he doesn't want any of Stanley's whiskey. Blanche knows that something is wrong, but she says she will not "cross-examine" the witness. Mitch keeps trying to say something, but Blanche continues babbling. When Blanche offers him some liquor, he tells her that Stanley told him that she had been lapping it up all summer. He then says it is dark and wonders why Blanche has never gone out with him in the daytime. Mitch wants to turn on the lights, but Blanche pleads with him not to. She

doesn't want light and truth; she wants magic and illusion. But Mitch jerks the lantern off the light and forces Blanche under it. He notices that she is older than he had supposed, but he could have accepted that if she had been straight.

He tells Blanche about the stories he has heard and how he checked them out and three people swore to them. When Mitch mentions the Flamingo, Blanche drops her pose and tells how after the death of her young husband, there was nothing to fill the void except intimacies with strangers. She went from one stranger to another until she had an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy. She was desperate when she came to New Orleans. Then she met Mitch, who told her that he needed someone and she needed someone. Mitch accuses her of lying to him. She says that she never lied in her heart. At this time, a street vendor passes by selling flowers for the dead. When Blanche hears the vendor, she thinks of all the deaths she has had to suffer, and that the opposite of death is desire. She even tells Mitch about her escapades with the Army camp which was near her house. Suddenly, Mitch puts his arms around her and demands what he has been missing all summer. She requests marriage. Mitch tells her she is not good enough. Blanche orders him to leave or she will start screaming. As he remains staring, she runs to the window and begins to scream *Fire,* wildly. Mitch stumbles out.

Analysis

Note the opening description of Blanche. She is in her old dilapidated clothes — her last remnants of a past life. The "Varsouviana" music — the tune which played when her husband shot himself — is heard as background music and Blanche is drinking to escape it all.

The appearance of Mitch, unshaven and dressed in his dirty work clothes emphasizes again that he is Blanche's last chance — that he is a rough and rather uncouth character.

With Mitch's appearance, Blanche immediately begins to act the part of the innocent young girl and the polka music stops. But almost immediately she realizes that something is wrong and the music begins again. During the first part of this scene, Blanche talks so much that Mitch doesn't have a chance to make his accusations against her. Her incessant line of chatter functions to cover up her fears and to postpone hearing what she fears to hear.

Mitch's first confrontation comes when he forces Blanche under the light. This act has multiple significance. First, on the realistic level, Blanche has deceived Mitch about her age

and the light reveals Blanche's deception. The revelation of this deception leads to the other deceptions. Second, Blanche has constantly avoided the light ever since her young husband shot himself. She has had nothing stronger than a candle light since his death. Thus, Blanche has passed her life in semi-darkness and to be forced into the light makes her violate her inner nature. Third, being forced into the light here symbolizes the revelation of the truth about Blanche's past life. She has tried to conceal her life of dissipation and when Mitch forces her under the light, it is the same as making her realize and confess her past life. And fourth, Blanche's whole theory of living involves magic and illusion. She doesn't want realism. Instead, she prefers the magic of illusion. And rather than the truth, she lives for "what *ought* to be." Thus forcing Blanche into the light makes her see things in their ugly realism — that is, it makes her see how her life actually was instead of how it *ought to have been.*

Blanche's confession of her past life is almost too much. It has that Tennessee Williams quality of sensationalism. It is almost unbelievable, and, as some critics would maintain, unnecessary for her to have such a lurid and degenerate past. Her confession doesn't seem to fit with this delicate moth-like creature on the edge of disintegration. But the opposite argument must be seen. Williams has attempted to show how Blanche's over-delicate and over-sensitive nature was the reason she sought escape from her failure with her young husband by turning to alcohol and to intimacies with strangers.

When Mitch accuses Blanche of lying to him, she maintains that she never lied "inside. I didn't lie in my heart." Blanche means that she has used some deception to trap Mitch, but a certain amount of illusion is a woman's charm, but as she said to Stanley in Scene 2: "when a thing is important, I tell the truth." And she did tell the truth to Mitch when she told him that she loved and needed him and that they needed each other.

Mitch, having learned of Blanche's past, then feels that she should sleep with him. In his disappointment with the truth about Blanche, he doesn't realize that she could give herself to a stranger but not freely to someone whom she knew as well as she knows Mitch and certainly not under such crude circumstances. Therefore, at the end of the scene, Blanche is at her lowest ebb of existence now that Stanley has given her a bus ticket back to Laurel and Mitch has deserted her.

Summary and Analysis Scene 10

Summary

Later that evening, Blanche is dressed in an old, faded gown and has a rhinestone tiara on her head. She has been drinking heavily. She is talking to herself when Stanley enters. He tells her that the baby won't come before morning, and the doctors sent him home. He wonders about the outfit that Blanche has on. She tells him a fabulous story about how she just received an invitation for a cruise in the Caribbean with a Mr. Shep Huntleigh. Stanley drinks some beer and gets out the silk pajamas which he wore on his wedding night. Blanche thinks how wonderful it will be to have some privacy again and to be among something other than swine. Blanche tells Stanley how Mitch came to her, imploring her forgiveness, but she sent him away because "deliberate cruelty is not forgivable." Then Stanley attacks her, telling her she is lying and that she has no invitation. Blanche flees to the telephone trying to reach Shep Huntleigh, but she can't seem to compose a message. She leaves the phone to get the address. Stanley replaces the phone on the hook. Blanche wants him to stand aside so she can pass, and Stanley thinks that it might not be too bad to interfere with her. As he advances toward her, Blanche breaks a bottle so as "to twist the broken end in your face." He springs on her as she sinks to the floor. He picks up her inert body and carries it into the bedroom.

Analysis

This scene presents the final confrontation between Blanche and Stanley, with Stanley emerging as the undisputed winner.

The beginning of the scene reestablishes the basic difference between Blanche and Stanley. She is once again living in her world of illusion and pretense — a world that Stanley, the realist, cannot understand or tolerate.

Blanche says that she dismissed Mitch, because "deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion." Therefore since Blanche was once deliberately cruel to her young husband, she has since formulated this idea. And of course, she must view herself as being unforgivable for her cruelty to him. This perhaps motivates a lot of her actions, but her statement comes at an ironic point — that is, just before Stanley is about to rape her — an act of extreme cruelty.

In his exhilaration over the forthcoming birth of his child, Stanley is seen as a wild animal on the prey. For the first time, he sees Blanche as someone whom it "wouldn't be bad to —

interfere with." This idea plants the idea of seduction in his mind. He also feels that Blanche has been "swilling down my liquor" all summer and that he deserves a little pay. But also, Stanley cannot understand why a woman who has slept with so many men would object to sleeping with him. And, most important, Stanley has always functioned with the idea of enjoying the things that are his — that is, "his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer." Blanche has lived in his house, has eaten his food, and has drunk his liquor, but she is definitely not his; in fact, she is openly antagonistic toward him. Thus, his rape is partially to prove again his superiority over her. And since her presence in his house has almost destroyed his marriage, he feels no remorse or regret over Blanche's destruction.

Blanche's horrified aversion to sleeping with Stanley is not based on any moral grounds. Instead, he represents every aspect of life which she is unable to cope with. He appears to her as her destroyer, and his rape of her is actually the cause of her madness. And she was not strong enough to defend herself against this hostile force. Thus it is not the actual rape which causes her madness, but the idea that she was raped by a man who represents everything unacceptable to her. Thus, she is symbolically unable to cope with the brutal realistic world represented by Stanley.

Summary and Analysis Scene 11

Summary

Several weeks later, Stella is seen packing some of Blanche's things. There is another poker party going on. This time, Stanley is winning. Eunice comes in to help with the packing. Stella wonders if she is doing the right thing by sending Blanche to the state institution. Stella tells Eunice that she couldn't continue to live with Stanley if she believed Blanche's story. Eunice assures Stella that she is doing the only sensible thing. Blanche comes from the bathroom, and she possesses a "hysterical vivacity." She wonders if she has received a call. Blanche speaks suddenly with a hysteria demanding to know what is going on. She feels trapped and wants to get out of the trap. Stella and Eunice help her get dressed. Blanche eats some unwashed grapes and thinks that she would like to die somewhere on the sea from eating unwashed grapes and be buried in a clean white sack.

The doctor and a matron from the state institution arrive to pick up Blanche. Eunice announces that "someone is calling for Blanche." Blanche is ready to go but doesn't want to

pass through the room where the men are playing poker. When she sees the doctor, she panics and tries to run. Stanley blocks her way, and along with the matron, advances toward her. Stanley assures her that she left nothing here but the paper lantern which he tears off the light bulb and hands to Blanche. As Blanche screams and tries to break away, Stella runs out on the porch where Eunice tries to comfort her. Meanwhile, the matron pins Blanche down. The doctor advances and speaks quietly and softly to Blanche. She responds to his quietness and says that she has "always depended on the kindness of strangers." The doctor leads her out and Stanley comes to comfort Stella by fondling her breasts.

Analysis

This scene balances with the poker game in Scene 3. But where Stanley was losing in the earlier game, he is now the winner, suggesting that he is once again the undisputed master in his own house.

Williams' position is probably best stated in Eunice's remark to Stella after Stella says that she couldn't go on living with Stanley if Blanche's story is true. Eunice tells her "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going." But apparently Blanche did not have the strength to go on living in spite of everything. She was too delicate to be able to withstand the pressures of living in a brutal, realistic world.

When Blanche refuses to go with the doctor and matron, she tells them that she has forgotten something. It is then that Stanley wonders what and takes off the "magic" Chinese lantern from the light, leaving the naked light bulb glaring at Blanche. This is the final blow for Blanche who tries to escape and is trapped by the matron. Again the light symbolism emphasizes Blanche's desire to live in a world of semi-illusion which contradicts Stanley's world.

The play ends with Stanley's comforting Stella in the only way he knows how — that is, by unbuttoning her blouse and fondling her breasts, again emphasizing him as the "gaudy seed-bearer."

The last line of the play puns on the man's world as Steve announces that the game is "seven-card stud," a particularly wild poker game.

2. Themes, Symbols and Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

2.1 Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Most plays have acts. Streetcar doesn't. Rather it is divided into eleven scenes occurring in chronological order and taking place between May and September.

In most productions of a play, you'll find intermissions at natural breaks in the action. In many productions of Streetcar, intermissions come after Stanley has won his first major victory over Blanche, at the end of Scene Four. A second break sometimes occurs when Scene Six concludes, after Blanche has won Mitch's love. Thus, the first third of the play ends with a defeat for Blanche, the second with a triumph.

The last scenes follow Blanche's decline into permanent defeat-her insanity. You might observe a kind of rhythm in the action of the play, a pulsing series of episodes, which may explain why Williams chose to build the play using several short scenes instead of a few longer acts. There's a rhythm of conflict and reconciliation: Stanley and Stella have a row, then make up. Eunice and Steve fight, then make up. Blanche, as usual, is out of step with the others. She establishes a liaison with Mitch, which then breaks up. Perhaps the regularity of the pattern is meant to suggest vaguely the rhythm of passion, which reaches a climax in the rape scene. The suggestion becomes more plausible if you think of the play as a sexual battle between Stanley and Blanche.

A Streetcar Named Desire is episodic. A drawing of the play's structure traces the conflict between Blanche and Stanley and also parallels the state of Blanche's emotional and mental health.

• Scene 1: Blanche arrives in New Orleans, meets Stanley; each takes the other's measure. Blanche is generally optimistic.

• Scene 2: Conflict over loss of Belle Reve. Blanche submits papers to Stanley.

• Scene 3: Poker night. Blanche meets Mitch. Blanche is hopeful about the future.

• Scene 4: Blanche berates Stella. Stanley defeats Blanche in competition for Stella's allegiance.

• Scene 5: Blanche plans for future; she kisses newsboy. Blanche hopes that Mitch will provide love.

• Scene 6: Date with Mitch. Blanche wins Mitch's love.

• Scene 7: Preparation for party. Blanche is in high spirits.

• Scene 8: Stanley gives Blanche bus ticket; Blanche horrified.

• Scene 9: Mitch visits Blanche, attempts rape. Blanche is distraught.

• Scene 10: Stanley returns; rapes Blanche. Blanche destroyed.

• Scene 11: Blanche sent to insane asylum.

2.2 Themes

2.2.1 Fantasy/Illusion

Blanche dwells in illusion; fantasy is her primary means of self-defense, both against outside threats and against her own demons. But her deceits carry no trace of malice, but rather they come from her weakness and inability to confront the truth head-on. She is a quixotic figure, seeing the world not as it is but as it ought to be. Fantasy has a liberating magic that protects her from the tragedies she has had to endure. Throughout the play, Blanche's dependence on illusion is contrasted with Stanley's steadfast realism, and in the end it is Stanley and his worldview that win. To survive, Stella must also resort to a kind of illusion, forcing herself to believe that Blanche's accusations against Stanley are false so that she can continue living with her husband.

2.2.2 The Old South and the New South

Stella and Blanche come from a world that is rapidly dying. Belle Reve, their family's ancestral plantation, has been lost, and the two sisters are the last living members of their family and, symbolically, of their old world of cavaliers and cotton fields. Their strain of Old South was not conquered by the march of General Sherman's army, but by the steady march of time, and as Blanche's beauty fades with age so too do these vestiges of that civilization gone with the wind. Blanche attempts to stay back in the past but it is impossible, and Stella only survives by mixing her DuBois blood with the common stock of the Kowalskis; the old South can only live on in a diluted, bastardized form.

2.2.3 Cruelty

The only unforgivable crime, according to Blanche, is deliberate cruelty. This sin is Stanley's specialty. His final assault against Blanche is a merciless attack against an already-beaten foe. Blanche, on the other hand, is dishonest but she never lies out of malice. Her cruelty is unintentional; often, she lies in a vain or misguided effort to please. Throughout the play, we see the full range of cruelty, from Blanche's well-intentioned deceits to Stella self-deceiving treachery to Stanley's deliberate and unchecked malice. In Williams' plays, there are many ways to hurt someone. And some are worse than others.

2.2.4 The Primitive and the Primal

Blanche often speaks of Stanley as ape-like and primitive. Stanley represents a very unrefined manhood, a Romantic idea of man untouched by civilization and its effeminizing influences. His appeal is clear: Stella cannot resist him, and even Blanche, though repulsed, is on some level drawn to him. Stanley's unrefined nature also includes a terrifying amorality. The service of his desire is central to who he is; he has no qualms about driving his sister-in-law to madness, or raping her. In Freudian terms, Stanley is pure id, while Blanche represents the super-ego and Stella the ego – but the balancing between the id and super-ego is not found only in Stella's mediation, but in the tension between these forces within Blanche herself. She finds Stanley's primitivism so threatening precisely because it is something she sees, and hides, within her.

2.2.5 Desire

Closely related to the theme above, desire is the central theme of the play. Blanche seeks to deny it, although we learn later in the play that desire is one of her driving motivations; her desires have caused her to be driven out of town. Physical desire, and not intellectual or spiritual intimacy, is the heart of Stella's and Stanley's relationship, but Williams makes it clear that this does not make their bond any weaker. Desire is also Blanche's undoing, because she cannot find a healthy way of dealing with her natural urges - she is always either trying to suppress them or pursuing them with abandon.

2.2.6 Loneliness

The companion theme to desire is loneliness, and between these two extremes, Blanche is lost. She desperately seeks companionship and protection in the arms of strangers. And she has never recovered from her tragic and consuming love for her first husband. Blanche is in need of a defender. But in New Orleans, she will find instead the predatory and merciless Stanley.

2.2.7 Desire vs Cemeteries / Romance vs Realism

The fundamental tension of the play is this play between the romantic and the realistic, played out in parallel in the pairing of lust and death. Blanche takes the streetcars named Desire and Cemeteries, and like the French's "la petite mort," those cars and the themes they symbolize run together to Blanche's final destination. This dichotomy is present in nearly every element of the play, from the paired characterizations of Blanche the romantic and Stanley the realist, to how all of Blanche's previous sexual encounters are tangled up with death, to the actual names of the streetcars.

2.3 Symbols

2.3.1 Shadows and Cries

As Blanche and Stanley begin to quarrel in Scene Ten, various oddly shaped shadows begin to appear on the wall behind her. Discordant noises and jungle cries also occur as Blanche begins to descend into madness. All of these effects combine to dramatize Blanche's final breakdown and departure from reality in the face of Stanley's physical threat. When she loses her sanity in her final struggle against Stanley, Blanche retreats entirely into her own world. Whereas she originally colors her perception of reality according to her wishes, at this point in the play she ignores reality altogether.

2.3.2 The Varsouviana Polka

The Varsouviana is the polka tune to which Blanche and her young husband Allan Grey, were dancing when she last saw him alive. Earlier that day, she had walked in on him in bed with an older male friend. The three of them then went out dancing together, pretending that nothing had happened. In the middle of the Varsouviana, Blanche turned to Allen and told him that he "disgusted" her. He ran away and shot himself in the head.

The polka music plays at various points in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* when Blanche is feeling remorse for Allen's death. The first time we hear it is in Scene One, when Stanley meets Blanche and asks her about her husband. Its second appearance occurs when Blanche tells Mitch the story of Allen Grey. From this point on, the polka plays increasingly often, and it always drives Blanche to distraction. She tells Mitch that it ends only after she hears the sound of a gunshot in her head.

The polka and the moment it evokes represent Blanche's loss of innocence. The suicide of the young husband Blanche loved dearly was the event that triggered her mental decline. Since then, Blanche hears the Varsouviana whenever she panics and loses her grip on reality.

2.3.3 "It's Only a Paper Moon"

In Scene Seven, Blanche sings this popular ballad while she bathes. The song's lyrics describe the way love turns the world into a "phony" fantasy. The speaker in the song says that if both lovers believe in their imagined reality, then it's no longer "make-believe." These lyrics sum up Blanche's approach to life. She believes that her fibbing is only her means of enjoying a better way of life and is therefore essentially harmless.

As Blanche sits in the tub singing "It's Only a Paper Moon," Stanley tells Stella the details of Blanche's sexually corrupt past. Williams ironically juxtaposes Blanche's fantastical understanding of herself with Stanley's description of Blanche's real nature. In reality, Blanche is a sham who feigns propriety and sexual modesty. Once Mitch learns the truth about Blanche, he can no longer believe in Blanche's tricks and lies.

2.3.4 Meat

In Scene One, Stanley throws a package of meat at his adoring Stella for her to catch. The action sends Eunice and the Negro woman into peals of laughter. Presumably, they've picked up on the sexual innuendo behind Stanley's gesture. In hurling the meat at Stella, Stanley states the sexual proprietorship he holds over her. Stella's delight in catching Stanley's meat signifies her sexual infatuation with him.

3. Character List

3.1 Major Characters

3.1.1 Blanche DuBois

Blanche DuBois appears in the first scene dressed in white, the symbol of purity and innocence. She is seen as a moth-like creature. She is delicate, refined, and sensitive. She is cultured and intelligent. She can't stand a vulgar remark or a vulgar action. She would never willingly hurt someone. She doesn't want realism; she prefers magic. She doesn't always tell the truth, but she tells "what ought to be truth." Yet she has lived a life that would make the most degenerate person seem timid. She is, in general, one of Williams' characters who do

not belong in this world. And her type will always be at the mercy of the brutal, realistic world.

Early in her life, Blanche had married a young boy who had a softness and tenderness "which wasn't like a man's," even though he "wasn't the least bit effeminate looking." By unexpectedly entering a room, she found him in a compromising situation with an older man. They went that night to a dance where a polka was playing. In the middle of the dance, Blanche told her young husband that he disgusted her. This deliberate act of cruelty on Blanche's part caused her young husband to commit suicide. Earlier, her love had been like a "blinding light," and since that night Blanche has never had any light stronger than a dim candle. Blanche has always thought she failed her young lover when he most needed her. She felt also that she was cruel to him in a way that Stanley would like to be cruel to her. And Blanche's entire life has been affected by this early tragic event.

Immediately following this event, Blanche was subjected to a series of deaths in her family and the ultimate loss of the ancestral home. The deaths were ugly, slow, and tortuous. They illustrated the ugliness and brutality of life.

To escape from these brutalities and to escape from the lonely void created by her young husband's death, Blanche turned to alcohol and sexual promiscuity. The alcohol helped her to forget. When troubled, the dance tune that was playing when Allan committed suicide haunts her until she drinks enough so as to hear the shot which then signals the end of the music.

Blanche gives herself to men for other reasons. She feels that she had failed her young husband in some way. Therefore, she tries to alleviate her guilt by giving herself at random to other young men. And by sleeping with others, she is trying to fill the void left by Allan's death — "intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with." And she was particularly drawn to very young men who would remind her of her young husband. During these years of promiscuity, Blanche has never been able to find anyone to fill the emptiness. Thus Blanche's imagined failure to her young husband and her constant encounter with the ugliness of death forced the delicate young girl to seek distraction by and forgetfulness through intimacies with strangers and through alcohol which could make the tune in her head stop.

But throughout all of these episodes, Blanche has still retained a degree of innocence and purity. She still plays the role of the ideal type of person she would like to be. She refuses to

see herself as she is but instead creates the illusion of what *ought to be*. Thus, in her first encounters, she fails with Stanley, because she attempts to be what she thinks a lady *should* be rather than being frank, open, and honest as Stanley would have liked it.

Blanche's actions with Stanley are dictated by her basic nature. The woman must create an illusion. "After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion." And if Blanche cannot function as a woman, then her life is invalid. She therefore tries to captivate Stanley by flirting with him and by using all of her womanly charms. She knows no other way to enter into her present surroundings. Likewise, she must change the apartment. She can't have the glaring, open light bulb. She must have subdued light. She must live in the quiet, half-lit world of charm and illusion. She does not want to see things clearly but wants all ugly truths covered over with the beauty of imagination and illusion.

But Blanche also realizes that she must attract men with her physical body. Thus, she does draw Mitch's attention by undressing in the light so that he can see the outline of her body.

When Blanche meets Mitch, she realizes that here is a strong harbor where she can rest. Here is the man who can give her a sense of belonging and who is also captivated by her girlish charms. She deceives him into thinking her prim and proper but in actuality, Blanche would like to *be* prim and proper. And as she later told Mitch: "inside, I never lied." Her essential nature and being have never been changed by her promiscuity. She gave of her body but not of her deeper self. To Mitch, she is ready to give her whole being.

Then Mitch forces her to admit her past life. With this revelation, Blanche is deprived of her chief attributes — that is, her illusions and her pretense. She is then forced to admit all of her past. After hearing her confessions, we see that Mitch aligns himself with the Stanley world. He cannot understand the reasons why Blanche had to give herself to so many people, and, if she did, he thinks that she should have no objections to sleeping with one more man. But Blanche's intimacies have always been with strangers. She cannot wantonly give herself to someone for whom she has affection. Thus she forces Mitch to leave.

Later that same night when Stanley comes from the hospital, Blanche encounters the same type of brutality. Stanley rapes Blanche, assuming that she has slept with so many men in the past, one more would not matter. In actuality, Blanche's action in the first part of the play indicates that on first acquaintance, when Stanley was a stranger, she desired him or at least flirted with him. But Stanley was never able to understand the sensitivity behind Blanche's

pretense. Even when Stella refers to Blanche as delicate, Stanley cries out in disbelief: "Some delicate piece she is." It is, then, Stanley's forced brutality which causes Blanche to crack up. The rape is Blanche's destruction as an individual. In all previous sexual encounters, Blanche had freely given of herself. But to be taken so cruelly and so brutally by a man who represents all qualities which Blanche found obnoxious caused her entire world to collapse.

Blanche's last remarks in the play seem to echo pathetically her plight and predicament in life. She goes with the doctor because he seems to be a gentleman and because he is a stranger. As she leaves, she says, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Thus, Blanche's life ends in the hands of the strange doctor. She was too delicate, too sensitive, too refined, and too beautiful to live in the realistic world. Her illusions had no place in the Kowalski world and when the illusions were destroyed, Blanche was also destroyed.

3.1.2 Stanley Kowalski

We cannot deny the fact that Stanley Kowalski is a fascinating character. The usual reaction is to see him as a brute because of the way that he treats the delicate Blanche. Some will even go so far as to dislike this man intensely. But this dislike would stem from too much identification with Blanche.

Stanley Kowalski lives in a basic, fundamental world which allows for no subtleties and no refinements. He is the man who likes to lay his cards on the table. He can understand no relationship between man and woman except a sexual one, where he sees the man's role as giving and taking pleasure from this relationship. He possesses no quality that would not be considered manly in the most basic sense. By more sensitive people, he is seen as common, crude, and vulgar. Certainly, his frankness will allow for no deviation from the straightforward truth. His dress is loud and gaudy. He relishes in loud noises, and his voice rings out like a loud bellow.

To the over-sensitive person, such as Blanche, Stanley represents a holdover from the Stone Age. He is bestial and brutal and determined to destroy that which is not his. He is like the Stone Age savage bringing home the meat from the kill. He is animal-like and his actions are such. He eats like an animal and grunts his approval or disapproval. When aroused to anger, he strikes back by throwing things, like the radio. Or he breaks dishes or strikes his wife. He is the man of physical action.

Even the symbols connected with Stanley support his brutal, animal-like approach to life. In the first scene, he is seen bringing home the raw meat. His clothes are loud and gaudy. His language is rough and crude. His outside pleasures are bowling and poker. When he is losing at poker, he is unpleasant and demanding. When he is winning, he is happy as a little boy.

He is, then, "the gaudy seed-bearer," who takes pleasure in his masculinity. "Animal joy in his being is implicit," and he enjoys mainly those things that are *his* — his wife, his apartment, his liquor, "his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer."

With the appearance of Blanche, Stanley feels an uncomfortable threat to those things that are his. Blanche becomes a threat to his way of life; she is a foreign element, a hostile force, a superior being whom he can't understand. She is a challenge and a threat. He feels most strongly that she is a threat to his marriage. Thus when the basic man, such as Stanley, feels threatened, he must strike back. It is a survival of the fittest.

Stanley first feels the threat when he finds out that Belle Reve has been lost. He does not care for Belle Reve as a bit of ancestral property, but, instead, he feels that a part of it is *his.* If his wife has been swindled, he has been swindled. He has lost property, something that belonged to him. He probes into the problem without tact or diplomacy. He goes straight to the truth without any shortcuts. His only concern is to discover whether he has been cheated. He does not concern himself with the feelings of Blanche. He wants only to force the issue to its completion.

Stanley feels the first threat to his marriage after the big fight he has with Stella after the poker game. He knows that this would not have occurred if Blanche had not been present. It is her presence which is causing the dissension between him and his wife. Then the following morning when he overhears himself being referred to as bestial, common, brutal, and a survivor of the Stone Age, he is justifiably enraged against Blanche. He resents her superior attitude and bides his time.

Throughout Blanche's stay at his house, he feels that she has drunk *his* liquor, eaten *his* food, used his house, but still has belittled him and has opposed him. She has never conceded to him his right to be the "king" in his own house. Thus, he must sit idly by and see his marriage and home destroyed, and himself belittled, or else he must strike back. His attack is slow and calculated. He begins to compile information about Blanche's past life. He must present her

past life to his wife so that she can determine who the superior person is. When he has his information accumulated, he is convinced that however common he is, his life and his past are far superior to Blanche's. Now that he feels his superiority again, he begins to act. He feels that having proved how degenerate Blanche actually is, he is now justified in punishing her directly for all the indirect insults he has had to suffer from her. Thus he buys the bus ticket for her back to Laurel and reveals her past to Mitch.

Consequently, when we approach the rape scene, we must understand that Blanche has made Stanley endure quite a bit. She has never been sympathetic toward him. She has ridiculed him. Earlier she had even flirted with him but she has never been his. Thus, when Stanley finds out that she has slept so indiscriminately with so many people, he cannot understand why she should object to one more. Thus, he rapes her partly out of revenge, partly because one more man shouldn't make any difference, and finally, so that she will be his in the only way he fully understands.

Stanley, then, is the hard, brutal man who does not understand the refinements of life. He is controlled by natural instincts untouched by the advances of civilization. Thus, when something threatens him, he must strike back in order to preserve his own threatened existence. If someone gets destroyed, that is the price that must be paid. It is the survival of the fittest, and Stanley is the strongest.

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3.1.3 Harold “Mitch” Mitchell

Perhaps because he lives with his dying mother, Mitch is noticeably more sensitive than Stanley’s other poker friends. The other men pick on him for being a mama’s boy. Even in his first, brief line in Scene One, Mitch’s gentlemanly behavior stands out. Mitch appears to be a kind, decent human being who, we learn in Scene Six, hopes to marry so that he will have a woman to bring home to his dying mother.

Mitch doesn’t fit the bill of the chivalric hero of whom Blanche dreams. He is clumsy, sweaty, and has unrefined interests like muscle building. Though sensitive, he lacks Blanche’s romantic perspective and spirituality, as well as her understanding of poetry and literature. She toys with his lack of intelligence—for example, when she teases him in French because she knows he won’t understand—duping him into playing along with her self-flattering charades.

Though they come from completely different worlds, Mitch and Blanche are drawn together by their mutual need of companionship and support, and they therefore believe themselves right for one another. They also discover that they have both experienced the death of a loved one. The snare in their relationship is sexual. As part of her prim-and-proper act, Blanche repeatedly rejects Mitch's physical affections, refusing to sleep with him. Once he discovers the truth about Blanche's sordid sexual past, Mitch is both angry and embarrassed about the way Blanche has treated him. When he arrives to chastise her, he states that he feels he deserves to have sex with her, even though he no longer respects her enough to think her fit to be his wife.

The difference in Stanley's and Mitch's treatment of Blanche at the play's end underscores Mitch's fundamental gentlemanliness. Though he desires and makes clear that he wants to sleep with Blanche, Mitch does not rape her and leaves when she cries out. Also, the tears Mitch sheds after Blanche struggles to escape the fate Stanley has arranged for her show that he genuinely cares for her. In fact, Mitch is the only person other than Stella who seems to understand the tragedy of Blanche's madness.

3.1.4 Stella Kowalski

Blanche's younger sister, about twenty-five years old and of a mild disposition that visibly sets her apart from her more vulgar neighbors. Stella possesses the same timeworn aristocratic heritage as Blanche, but she jumped the sinking ship in her late teens and left Mississippi for New Orleans. There, Stella married lower-class Stanley, with whom she shares a robust sexual relationship. Stella's union with Stanley is, animal and spiritual, violent but renewing. After Blanche's arrival, Stella is torn between her sister and her husband. Eventually, she stands by Stanley, perhaps in part because she gives birth to his child near the play's end. While she loves and pities Blanche, she cannot bring herself to believe Blanche's accusations that Stanley dislikes Blanche, and she eventually dismisses Blanche's claim that Stanley raped her. Stella's denial of reality at the play's end shows that she has more in common with her sister than she thinks.

3.2 Minor Characters

3.2.1 Eunice Hubbell

Eunice Hubbell is the owner of the apartment building, and Steve's wife. She is generally helpful, offering Stella and Blanche shelter after Stanley beats Stella. Indeed, she has a personal understanding of the Kowalskis' relationship because it mirrors her own. In the end, she advises Stella that in spite of Blanche's tragedy, life must go on.

3.2.2 Steve Hubbell

Steve Hubbell is Eunice's husband, and owner of the apartment building. As one of the poker players, Steve has the final line of the play. It comes as Blanche is carted off to the asylum and Steve coldly deals another hand.

3.2.3 Pablo Gonzales

Pablo Gonzales is one of the poker players, who punctuates the game with Spanish phrases.

3.2.4 Negro Woman

The Negro Woman is a non-naturalistic character; it seems that the actor playing this role is in fact playing a number of different Negro women, all minor characters. Emphasizing the non-naturalistic aspect of the character, in the original production of Streetcar, the "Negro Woman" was played by a male actor.

3.2.5 A Strange Man (The Doctor)

The Doctor arrives at the end to bring Blanche on her "vacation." After the Nurse has pinned her, the Doctor succeeds in calming Blanche. She latches onto him, depending, now and always, "on the kindness of strangers."

3.2.6 A Strange Woman (The Nurse)

The Nurse is a brutal and impersonal character, institutional and severe in an almost stylized fashion. She wrestles Blanche to the ground.

3.2.7 A Young Collector

The Young Collector comes to collect money for the paper. Blanche throws herself at him shamelessly.

3.2.8 A Mexican Woman

The Mexican Woman sells flowers for the dead during the powerful scene when Blanche recounts her fall from grace.

4. Williams’ contribution to American Literature.

Thomas Lanier Williams III, better known as Tennessee Williams, is recognized today as one of America’s most essential and influential dramatists. Even today, his works are immortal

components of our popular culture, ranging from memorable lines of dialogue to poignant American characters. Without question, Tennessee Williams emerged swiftly from obscurity, and placed himself among the great playwrights of American history. Williams established himself as a recognized playwright in the wake of World War II, during which Modernist deconstructions of literature were flourishing. In late 1947, Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered, securing his position as a major American playwright. *Streetcar* served as a somewhat monumental contribution to American theater: following a Modernistic trend, in which the laws and conventions of literature are bent and questioned, *Streetcar* eschewed a generic restriction, and served simply to reflect American habits and motivations. Though *Streetcar* is Williams' most famous and groundbreaking project, his other works, including *The Rose Tattoo, The Glass Menagerie,* and the Pulitzer-prize winning *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof,* demonstrate a similar devotion to American ideals and realistic human nature. Essentially, Williams' canon of work emerged not as an attempt to follow literary patterns, but rather, as an honest and thorough depiction of human nature in America — not surprisingly, his efforts became an icon of American theater as a whole.

Tennessee Williams has achieved superior status in the realm of American theater — amidst the critical discussion of America's greatest playwrights, Williams' name is consistently among the first to surface. Though Williams was a prolific author of drama, essays, poems, short stories, novels, and screenplays, his status as an essential American dramatist seems inseparably linked with what is arguably his most famous play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This play, premiering on Broadway in late 1947, seems to encapsulate Williams' signature dramatic style, including poetic imagery, cultural realism, and thorough portraits of life-like characters. Dramatic critic Philip C. Kolin visualizes *Streetcar* as the flagship play of American theater; he quotes playwright Dennis Reardon as saying "The search for the Great American Play can stop with *A Streetcar Named Desire*," and adds that "*Streetcar* is the *Huck Finn* of our theatre" (Kolin 2). Clearly, Williams' masterpiece is beyond skillful; it ventures to set an iconic standard for any modern American play. Essentially, *Streetcar* defines the American play because it displays a unique American aesthetic, reflecting the cultural background of its time period, and that it spawns an original dramatic structure, separate from past theatrical traditions.

5. Questions

1. A Streetcar Named Desire is laden with symbolism and metaphor. Pick one of the many recurring symbols – light, flowers, fire, bathing, meat – and trace its occurrence through the play. What does this motif add to the story and characterizations?

2. "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley," Stella says at the end of the play. Examine this statement – is Stella showing a remarkable self-awareness? Compare Stella's behavior in the final scene to that of Stanley and Mitch.

3. What is the relationship between sexuality and death in the play, and how does it factor into Blanche's nymphomania and fear of aging?

4. Why does Blanche avoid strong light?
5. How are specific physical symbols used to characterize the essential nature of Stanley Kowalski?
6. Why does Blanche so openly flirt with Stanley in the first part of the play? What significance does this later have?

7. Characterize the essential differences between the Kowalski and the DuBois worlds.

8. Why does Blanche's rape totally destroy her?

Where do you consider Williams' final view toward illusion and reality to lie? Does he align himself with Stanley's reality and brutal honesty, or with Blanche's illusion and pretense?

6. Further readings of Tennessee Williams

Plays:

- *Baby Doll & Tiger Tail*
- *Battle of Angels*
- *Camino Real*
- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*
- *Dragon Country: A Book of Plays*
- *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*
- *The Glass Menagerie*
- *The Gnadiges Fraulein*
- *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*

- *I Rise in Flame Cried the Phoenix*
- *Kingdom of Earth*
- *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*
- *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*
- *The Mutilated*
- *Night of the Iguana*
- *Not About Nightingales*
- *The Notebook of Trigorin*
- *A Perfect Analysis Given by a Parrot*
- *Period of Adjustment*
- *The Red Devil Battery Sign*
- *The Rose Tatoo*
- *Small Craft Warnings*
- *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- *Suddenly Last Summer*
- *Summer and Smoke*
- *Sweet Bird of Youth*
- *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*
- *Two-Character Play*
- *Vieux Carre*
- *Also Recommended: Ten 10-Minute Plays*

Other Works

- *Hard Candy: A Book of Stories*
- *One Arm and Other Stories*
- *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*
- *Stopped Rocking and Other Screenplays*
- *Tennessee Williams: Memoirs*
- *Collected Stories*

Films by Tennessee Williams

- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (DVD)*

- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (VHS)*
- *Glass Menagerie (VHS)*
- *Night of the Iguana (VHS)*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire (DVD)*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire (VHS)*
- *Tennessee Williams: Biography*

Paper XVIII- American Literature-II

Unit 3: Selected Poems- Walt Whitman

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

1.2 Biographical Sketch of Walt Whitman

1.3 Famous Poems of Walt Whitman

1.4 Whitman's Style of Writing Poetry

2. Characters in *Leaves of Grass*

3. Themes, Outlines, Motifs and Symbols

3.1 General Themes and Outlines of *Leaves of Grass*

3.2 Motifs and Symbols

4. Summary and Analysis of the following poems:

4.1 *Inscriptions*

4.2 *Starting from Paumanok*

4.3 *Song of Myself*

4.4 *Calamus, Song of the Open Road* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*

4.5 *Sea-Drift* and *By the Roadside*

4.6 *Drum-Taps*

4.7 *Memories of President Lincoln* and *Autumn Rivulets*

4.8 *From Noon to Starry Nights* and *Songs of Parting*

5. Whitman's Contribution to American Literature

6. Questions

7. Further Readings of Whitman

1.1 Objectives

This Unit provides a biographical sketch of Walt Whitman, some of his famous poems and his general style of writing poetry followed by a list of the characters in *Leaves of Grass*. It also includes a detailed study about its themes and outlines. Then the summary and analysis are discussed next, followed by a discussion about Whitman's contribution to American Literature. This unit concludes with a set of questions and a list of further readings of Whitman to gain knowledge about the critical aspects of *Leaves of Grass*.

1.2 Biographical sketch of Walt Whitman

Walter Whitman was born on the 31st of May, 1819 in Long Island, New York, US. He was an essayist, poet and journalist, as well as a volunteer nurse in the course of the American Civil War (1861–65). Walt Whitman participated in the shift from transcendentalism towards realism, and both views are present in his works. Walt Whitman, being one of the most influential American poets, is often refered to as "the father of the free verse".

Walt Whitman's writings, specifically *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems, were often highly controversial for what was seen as an obscene and excessively sexual language. *Leaves of Grass* was first published with Whitman's own money in 1855 and was described by him to be an attempt at reaching the common person through an American epic. Inside as well as outside his poetry, Walt Whitman exposed his views on the abolition of slavery, an egalitarian view on races; even if later in his life he saw abolition as a potential threat to democracy. Apart from his poetry, Walt Whitman's sexuality is also often a subject of discussion amongst his scholars and biographers. The discussions revolve around his alleged homosexuality and further on about whether he ever had sexual relations with men. Walt Whitman was of a tempered character and rarely drank alcohol, at times even arguing for its prohibition. Following a stroke in 1873, Whitman moved to New Jersey, which was to become his last home. Walt Whitman died on the 26th of March, 1892, at the age of 72, in New Jersey, US and his funeral was a public spectacle.

Walt Whitman was the second of nine children and received his nickname, "Walt", as a way of distinguishing him from his father, also named Walter. Whitman's parents had a fondness for great names and he had siblings named; Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and George Washington. Walt Whitman's childhood was usually described by himself as unhappy, mainly due to the economic struggles of his family. After concluding his formal schooling at the age of 11, Walt Whitman searched for jobs, first as an office boy and later as an apprentice for a newspaper, so as to help with the family income. He later taught in Long Island's school, a job that he thought to be unsatisfying, and founded the newspaper Long-Islander. In the end of the 30s, Whitman left for New York where he published many poems, short stories and a novel, *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, all works considered unremarkable. In the following years, Whitman worked for a variety of newspapers as editor and contributor. Also in this period Whitman made use of a constructed persona for writing a series of essays called *Sun-Down Papers—From the Desk of a Schoolmaster*, a skill that he employed many times throughout his career. In 1940 he was accused of having homosexual relations with some of his students at the

Locust Grove School in New York. In 1948 he lost his position at the Brooklyn Eagle for siding politically in opposition with the conservative newspaper owner.

Shortly before 1950 Walt Whitman decided to become a poet, and after experimenting with a variety of genres of the period, he set to write *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems that took him at least five years to publish and his whole life re-editing it. With *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman intended to write an American epic and for that employed cadence and free verse based on the bible. The work opens with a preface where Whitman describes himself as a "poet of the people" and praises the greatness of the American nation. In his words: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem". The first edition of the work, 795 copies, was paid for by Walt Whitman himself and carried no author's name, only a portrait made by Samuel Hollyer. At the time, due to financial difficulties, Whitman took a job as a journalist again for a couple years. The first edition received a high praise byRalph Waldo Emerson which stirred the interest in the work. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" which is quite understandable as Walt Whitman was greatly influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson's thinking. Nevertheless the work was heavily criticized by what was seen as obscene poetry, described by a critic as "trashy, profane and obscene". The second edition of the work was close to not being released due to the critical responses focused on the potentially offensive nature of the work but finally made into retail in August 1856 with 20 additional poems. *Leaves of Grass* was revised and re-released several times through Whitman's life and accumulated many admirers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott. Throughout the re-editions, Walt Whitman re-wrote, or updated many of the poems, dropped some, and added almost 200 poems to the 12 original ones. The most famous poems of *Leaves of Grass* are *I Sing the Body Electric*, *There Was a Child Went Forth*, *Song of Myself*, and *The Sleepers*, poems where Walt Whitman left behind the literary models of his time and invested on the common rhythms of American speech, including slang and informal expressions.

At the beginning of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman published *Beat! Beat! Drums!*, a patriotic poem, encouraging the North. After confusion over a list of wounded soldiers in the New York Times, Walt Whitman went South in search of his brother George Washington, whom he thought to be deceased. After having his wallet stolen on the way and having to do much of the travel by foot, Walt Whitman finally found his brother with only a minor injury on his cheek but was deeply affected by the sight of the wounded soldiers and amputated limbs. He left for Washington in 1862 and obtained a part-time job in the army, which left him time for volunteering as a nurse in the army hospitals, where he fell sick with "hospital malaria". Out of his experience as a nurse Whitman wrote *The Great Army of the Sick* and many years later a book entitled*Memoranda During the War*. Whitman wanted a position in the government and asked for Ralph Waldo Emerson's help. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to the Secretary of the Treasure but Walt Whitman was refused due to the disreputable fame of *Leaves of Grass*. He finally managed a post as a low-grade clerk in the Department of the Interior with the help of his fellow poet and journalist William Douglas O'Connor. He also lost this job, in 1865, most likely on moral grounds after the new Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, found a copy *Leaves of Grass*. O'Connor protested and managed to get Walt Whitman a job at the Attorney General's office and published an exaggerated biography of Walt Whitman, *The Good Gray Poet*, where

he praised him as a great patriot. The publication of the biography and of Whitman's relatively conventional poem *O Capitain! My Capitain!* on the death of Abraham Lincoln, aided Wat Whitman's increasing popularity. *O Capitain! My Capitain!* was also the only poem by Whitman to be included in anthologies during his lifetime. In 1968 an edition of his works, entitled *Poems of Walt Whitman*, was published in England and became very famous.
Walt Whitman is claimed to be the first American "poet of democracy", referring to his singularly American style and use of common people as subject matter. Many critics pointed to the close relation between the America of this period and his poetry. Walt Whitman himself conceptualized poetry as being in a symbiotic relationship with society. The literary critic Harold Bloom wrote that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is perhaps the highest candidate for being the "secular scripture of the United States", beatings works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. Whitman's vagabond lifestyle was adopted in the 1950s by the Beat movement and served as an inspiration for the character of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. His poetry was also used in music by great many composers. The house where Walt Whitman spent the last years of his life, in Camden, New Jersey, US, is open to the public and known as the *Walt Whitman House*.

1.3 Famous Poems of Whitman

- *Captain! My Captain!*
- *A Noiseless Patient Spider*
- *Song Of Myself*
- *To A Stranger*
- *A child said, What is the grass?*
- *A Glimpse*
- *A Child's Amaze*
- *A Song*
- *1861*
- *All Is Truth*
- *A Woman Waits For Me*
- *A Farm-Picture*
- *A Hand-Mirror*
- *A Riddle Song*
- *A Promise To California*
- *A Clear Midnight*
- *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*

1.4 Whitman's Style of Writing Poetry

Whitman is considered the father of free verse, although he did not invent it. Free verse is poetry without regular patterns of rhyme, rhythm or meter. Note: free verse has rhythm and meter. The pattern, however, is irregular. Rhythm is often created through the use of other poetic devices, including repetition, alliteration, and other sound devices.

The form of Whitman's poetry matches the content. Whitman celebrates the freedom of the individual and a celebration of freedom enjoyed in the United States. Because the attitude toward individual liberty in America was a break from European attitudes, he felt his poetry needed to break from European models as well.
Whitman wrote about ordinary people, which isn't altogether a break from European poets. The British Romanticscelebrated the individual, for example, and they too wrote in a style which was a break from traditional forms as well.
Whitman celebrated the body and felt that the body was a gateway to the soul.

2. Characters in *Leaves of Grass*

2.1 Walt Whitman
Whitman writes himself into his poetry. He is a bard and traveler on a mission to document the spiritual and physical realities of life in nineteenth century America.

2.2 The United States
Whitman's "I" is also meant to convey a personification of the United States. Whitman sees his own ideals and dreams as those of his country. Thus, his songs are songs of the United States as much as of an individual man.

2.3 Abraham Lincoln
Whitman greatly admired Lincoln and his leadership during America's Civil War. While Lincoln does not appear as a physical character in Whitman's poetry, *Leaves of Grass*does include several paeans to Lincoln's legacy.

2.4 The Common American
Whitman chronicles the lives of common Americans and upholds their work as true expressions of the American ideal. Their simple work demonstrates the ability of democracy to elevate the mundane into a spiritual reality.

2.5 The Sea
Whitman is continually fascinated by the sea and by its metaphorical qualities. He often uses the term "Old Mother" to signify the sea's inviting and spiritual hold over him. He also recognizes its danger and its ability to take away life. Whitman often idealizes the lives of sailors who seem to have no other purpose than to live in this "mother's" grasp.

2.6 The Reader
Whitman powerfully uses the reader as a character in several of his poems, including "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "So Long!" The reader is meant to become Whitman's comrade and close friend; a part of Whitman's journey.

2.7 Birds
Birds play important roles in several of the poems, including Out *of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.* Birds often bring songs of love that awaken, or reawaken, spiritual notions in the poet.

3. Themes, Outlines, Motifs and Symbols

3.1 General Themes and Outlines of *Leaves of Grass*

Whitman's work breaks the boundaries of poetic form and is generally prose-like. He also used unusual images and symbols in his poetry, including rotting leaves, tufts of straw, and debris. He also openly wrote about death and sexuality, including prostitution. He is often labeled as the father of free verse, though he did not invent it.

Poetic theory- Whitman wrote in the preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." He believed there was a vital, symbiotic relationship between the poet and society. This connection was emphasized especially in *Song of Myself* by using an all-powerful first-person narration. As an American epic, it deviated from the historic use of an elevated hero and instead assumed the identity of the common people. Leaves of Grass also responded to the impact that recent urbanization in the United States had on the masses.

Religion- Whitman was deeply influenced by deism. He denied any one faith was more important than another, and embraced all religions equally. In *Song of Myself*, he gave an inventory of major religions and indicated he respected and accepted all of them – a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem "With Antecedents", affirming: "I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception". In 1874, he was invited to write a poem about the Spiritualism movement, to which he responded, "It seems to me nearly altogether a poor, cheap, crude humbug." Whitman was a religious skeptic: though he accepted all churches, he believed in none. God, to Whitman, was both immanent and transcendent and the human soul was immortal and in a state of progressive development.

Sexuality- Whitman's sexuality is generally assumed to be homosexual or bisexual based on his poetry, though that has been at times disputed. His poetry depicts love and sexuality in a earthier, individualistic way common in American culture before the medicalization of sexuality in the late 19th century. Though Leaves of Grass was often labeled pornographic or obscene, only one critic remarked on its author's presumed sexual activity: in a November 1855 review, Rufus Wilmot Griswold suggested Whitman was guilty of "that horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians". Whitman had intense friendships with many men and boys throughout his life.

Peter Doyle may be the most likely candidate for the love of Whitman's life, according to biographer David S. Reaynolds. Doyle was a bus conductor whom Whitman met around 1866 and the two were inseparable for several years. Interviewed in 1895, Doyle said: "We were familiar at once — I put my hand on his knee — we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip — in fact went all the way back with me." In his notebooks, Whitman disguised Doyle's initials using the code "16.4". A more direct second-hand account comes from Oscar Wilde. Wilde met Whitman in America in 1882 and wrote to the homosexual rights activist George Cecil Ives that there was "no doubt" about the great American poet's sexual orientation — "I have the kiss of Walt Whitman still on my lips," he boasted. The only explicit description of Whitman's sexual activities is second hand.

There is also some evidence that Whitman may have had sexual relationships with women. He had a romantic friendship with a New York actress named Ellen Grey in the spring of 1862, but

it is not known if it was also sexual. He still had a photo of her decades later when he moved to Camden and referred to her as "an old sweetheart of mine". In a letter dated August 21, 1890 he claimed, "I have had six children — two are dead". This claim has never been corroborated.
Slavery - Whitman opposed the extension of slavery in the United States and supported the Wilmot Proviso. At first he was opposed to abolitionism, believing the movement did more harm than good. In 1846, he wrote that the abolitionists had, in fact, slowed the advancement of their cause by their "ultraism and officiousness". His main concern was that their methods disrupted the democratic process, as did the refusal of the Southern states to put the interests of the nation as a whole above their own. In 1856, in his unpublished The Eighteenth Presidency, addressing the men of the South, he wrote "you are either to abolish slavery or it will abolish you". Whitman also subscribed to the widespread opinion that even free African-Americans should not vote and was concerned at the increasing number of African-Americans in the legislature.

Legacy and influence- Walt Whitman has been claimed as America's first "poet of democracy", a title meant to reflect his ability to write in a singularly American character. A British friend of Walt Whitman, Mary Smith Whitall Costelloe, wrote: "You cannot really understand America without Walt Whitman, without Leaves of Grass... He has expressed that civilization, 'up to date,' as he would say, and no student of the philosophy of history can do without him."
Modernist poet Ezra Pound called Whitman "America's poet... He is America."Andrew Carnegie called him "the great poet of America so far". Whitman considered himself a messiah-like figure in poetry. Others agreed: one of his admirers, William Sloane Kennedy, speculated that "people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ".
The literary critic, Harold Bloom wrote, as the introduction for the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass:* If you are American, then Walt Whitman is your imaginative father and mother, even if, like me, you have never composed a line of verse. You can nominate a fair number of literary works as candidates for the secular Scripture of the United States. They might include Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Emerson's two series of *Essays* and *The Conduct of Life*. None of those, not even Emerson's, are as central as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman's vagabond lifestyle was adopted by the Beat movement and its leaders such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac in the 1950s and 1960s as well as anti-war poets like Adrienne Rich and Gary Snyder. Lawrence Ferlinghetti numbered himself among Whitman's "wild children", and the title of his 1961 collection starting from San Francisco is a deliberate reference to Whitman's *Starting from Paumanok*. Whitman also influenced Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, and was the model for the character of Dracula. Stoker said in his notes that Dracula represented the quintessential male which, to Stoker, was Whitman, with whom he corresponded until Whitman's death.

3.2 Motifs and symbols

3.2.1Motifs

3.2.1.1 Lists

Whitman filled his poetry with long lists. Often a sentence will be broken into many clauses, separated by commas, and each clause will describe some scene, person, or object. These lists create a sense of expansiveness in the poem, as they mirror the growth of the United States. Also, these lists layer images atop one another to reflect the diversity of American landscapes and people. In *Song of Myself*, for example, the speaker lists several adjectives to describe Walt Whitman in section 24. The speaker uses multiple adjectives to demonstrate the complexity of the individual: true individuals cannot be described using just one or two words. Later in this section, the speaker also lists the different types of voices who speak through Whitman. Lists are another way of demonstrating democracy in action: in lists, all items possess equal weight, and no item is more important than another item in the list. In a democracy, all individuals possess equal weight, and no individual is more important than another.

3.2.1.2 The Human Body

Whitman's poetry revels in its depictions of the human body and the body's capacity for physical contact. The speaker of *Song of Myself* claims that "copulation is no more rank to me than death is" to demonstrate the naturalness of taking pleasure in the body's physical possibilities. With physical contact comes spiritual communion: two touching bodies form one individual unit of togetherness. Several poems praise the bodies of both women and men, describing them at work, at play, and interacting. The speaker of *I Sing the Body Electric* boldly praises the perfection of the human form and worships the body because the body houses the soul. This free expression of sexuality horrified some of Whitman's early readers, and Whitman was fired from his job at the Indian Bureau in 1865 because the secretary of the interior found *Leaves of Grass* offensive. Whitman's unabashed praise of the male form has led many critics to argue that he was homosexual or bisexual, but the repressive culture of the nineteenth century prevented him from truly expressing those feelings in his work

3.2.1.3 Rhythm and Incantation

Many of Whitman's poems rely on rhythm and repetition to create a captivating, spellbinding quality of incantation. Often, Whitman begins several lines in a row with the same word or phrase, a literary device called anaphora. For example, the first four lines of "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (1865) each begin with the word *when*. The long lines of such poems as *Song of Myself* and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" force readers to inhale several bits of text without pausing for breath, and this breathlessness contributes to the incantatory quality of the poems. Generally, the anaphora and the rhythm transform the poems into celebratory chants, and the joyous form and structure reflect the joyousness of the poetic content. Elsewhere, however, the repetition and rhythm contribute to an elegiac tone, as in *O Captain! My Captain*! This poem uses short lines and words, such as *heart* and *father*, to mournfully incant an elegy for the assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

3.2.2 *Symbols*

3.2.2.1 Plants

Throughout Whitman's poetry, plant life symbolizes both growth and multiplicity. Rapid, regular plant growth also stands in for the rapid, regular expansion of the population of the United States. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman uses flowers, bushes, wheat, trees, and other plant life to signify the possibilities of regeneration and re-growth after death. As the speaker mourns the loss of Lincoln, he drops a lilac spray onto the coffin; the act of laying a flower on the coffin not only honors the person who has died but lends death a measure of dignity and respect. The title *Leaves of Grass* highlights another of Whitman's themes: the beauty of the individual. Each leaf or blade of grass possesses its own distinct beauty, and together the blades form a beautiful unified whole, an idea Whitman explores in the sixth section of *Song of Myself*. Multiple leaves of grass thus symbolize democracy, another instance of a beautiful whole composed of individual parts. In 1860, Whitman published an edition of *Leaves of Grass* that included a number of poems celebrating love between men. He titled this section "The Calamus Poems," after the phallic calamus plant.

3.2.2.2 The Self

Whitman's interest in the self, ties into his praise of the individual. Whitman links the self to the conception of poetry throughout his work, envisioning the self as the birthplace of poetry. Most of his poems are spoken from the first person, using the pronoun *I*. The speaker of Whitman's most famous poem, *Song of Myself*, even assumes the name Walt Whitman, but nevertheless the speaker remains a fictional creation employed by the poet Whitman. Although Whitman borrows from his own autobiography for some of the speaker's experiences, he also borrows many experiences from popular works of art, music, and literature. Repeatedly the speaker of this poem exclaims that he contains everything and everyone, which is a way for Whitman to reimagine the boundary between the self and the world. By imaging a person capable of carrying the entire world within him, Whitman can create an elaborate analogy about the ideal democracy, which would, like the self, be capable of containing the whole world.

4. Summary and Analysis of the following poems:

4.1 Inscriptions

Summary

Whitman begins his collection with a cheerful song of the self. He says he sings for the whole, Democratic self, "from top to toe." It is the complete "Form" of the self which is more worthy for consideration than any one part. His song is ultimately a song for vibrant life. It is a song for Modern Man.

In *As I Ponder'd in Silence*, Whitman sits and thinks on his past work. As he returns to his old verse, a Phantom rises before him. It is the Phantom of "The genius of poets of old lands…" The Phantom looks at Whitman and tells him that there has only been one theme "for ever-enduring bards" since the beginning of time: it is the theme of "War, the fortune of battles, / The making of perfect soldiers." Whitman resigns himself to this fact and tells that Phantom that this is also

his theme. He tells the Phantom that he wages war in his book, with his poems. It is a battle for life and death and a promotion of "brave soldiers."

Whitman writes for "mariners and all their ships" in *In Cabin'd Ships at Sea*. These ships sail the "boundless blue" ships. They think "voyagers' thoughts" of the land and sky and the motion of the ship as it rides the waves. He compares the ships to his own book, their tales "fold" into every page of his story. He then gives a succinct definition of his project in *To Foreign Lands*. In this poetic letter, he says that his goal is "to define America, her athletic Democracy" for those that have puzzled over the New World.

To a Historian addresses those that would look into the past in order to find meaning. Whitman describes the historian's process as one that treats humanity as if they were "creature(s) of politics, aggregates, rulers and priests…" Whitman describes his project as something much more. He desires to see life as it is lived and to uncover the potential of humanity. Whitman says, "I project the history of the future." This future is also tied up in what Whitman calls an "old cause," a "peerless, passionate, good cause" which is a "sweet idea" that has survived throughout the ages amongst all people. There has been a great angry war fought for this cause. Many stood to fight for the cause and those that were not able to fight can now "advance in this book." War revolves around the cause, as does his book, which makes war and the book the same.

The poems *When I Read the Book, Beginning My Studies*, and *Beginners* find the poet reflecting on his past and his future. He wonders how the biographies of great men could ever capture who they really were and he ponders the idea of someone one day writing his own biography. It is a funny thought because he admits that he often knows "little or nothing of my / real life…" Whitman remembers when he began his studies and how his consciousness and senses became awakened to the world around him. He admits that he has hardly moved beyond this phase of learning and instead only wants to "loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs." Whitman finds himself a part of the *Beginners*, those that find innovation and new ideas in their work and life. These people are "dear and dreadful…to the earth" as they relentlessly pursue their originality.

Whitman then turns his attention to the United States in *To the States* and *On Journeys through the States*. He has one piece of advice for the states: "Resist much, obey little…." He warns that once a land is enslaved it can never return to its liberty. Whitman then proclaims that he is setting forth on a journey through the States where he will confer with each one. He seeks to bring his message of life and liberty to each citizen so that "what you effuse may then return as the seasons return."

In *Me Imperturbe*, Whitman describes his time spent in the world as "passive, receptive, silent" just as the land around him is the same. No matter where he is, "the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the Tennessee" he seeks to be balanced and brave for what he confronts. Whitman rejoices in the particular songs of each American citizen in *I Hear America Singing*, each laborer has his own particular song. Carpenters, masons, boatmen, shoemakers, and wood-cutters each sing of the particular beauties of their craft. They sing of "what belongs to him or her and to none else…." Whitman makes clear, however, in *Still Though One I Sing* that his one true song is dedicated to Nationality and revolt.

Whitman ends the section with a reflection on his book and a call to his reader. In *Shut Not Your Doors,* Whitman pleads with the country's "proud libraries" to embrace the message that he brings in his own volume. It is a book "separate, no link'd with the rest nor felt by the / intellect…." Whitman pleads in *Poets to Come* with future generations to take up his own work and to justify his cause. He understands that his own work will only be defined by those that come after. In *To You* and *Thou Reader,* Whitman closes with a message for those that engage his work. He asks them to stop and speak with him when they meet him because "Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I…."

Analysis

It is helpful, when analyzing Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* to first consider the whole. Whitman published numerous versions of the book throughout his lifetime, the last coming in 1891-92 when he published what is known as the "deathbed" edition just a few months before he passed away. Whitman wrote almost all the poems of *Leaves of Grass* in free verse and this is considered to be one of his most groundbreaking achievements. Much of the poetry popular amongst American audiences up until Whitman's time relied on the structured meter and verse inherited from European poetry. Whitman's verse, however, is long and sprawling. His lines do not often demonstrate patterned breaks and do not rhyme in a traditional way, if at all. Though parts of his poems sometimes come close to iambic meter, Whitman never relies on structured verse to give pattern for an extended period.

The title *Leaves of Grass* has more than one meaning. At the surface, the title suggests a natural setting and, indeed, there is a strong naturalistic theme throughout the book. On another level, the title is meant as a pun. The term "grass" was often used in Whitman's day to denote works of minor literature and Whitman uses the word "leaves" to describe the pages of his book. Thus, Whitman is saying that his book is a collection of minor literature. Whitman obviously had a much grander vision for his book, however. He seems to understand in many of the book's early poems that his unusual style and controversial themes would not gain him a wide audience, yet in several of the poems he also pleads with the world to accept the message that he brings.

Leaves of Grass demonstrates a tension between the lyric and the epic. This tension is evident from the very opening section, *Inscriptions*. Traditionally the lyric poem is a poem that describes the inner thoughts and feelings of its author. These poems do not tell a story but, instead, portray the perception of the author. Epic poetry is very different. Epic poems are usually long poems that tell the story of a hero. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are two famous epic poems. The originality of *Leaves of Grass* comes from Whitman's ability to fuse the two genres. Each individual poem of the book is an example of the lyric form. It is Whitman's expression of his own thoughts and understandings of the world, yet taken as whole the book is an ambitious epic journey with Whitman as the hero. His journey is not just through the United Statues but also into death and life.

Whitman begins his book with the section, *Inscriptions*. It is a section meant to identify and name the themes of the entire work. At the outset, Whitman identifies the political themes, the themes of the individual, and the themes of life that he will tackle in *Leaves of Grass*. It is important to note the subject that Whitman names in the first line of the work: "One's-self." This self is not only Whitman, for he considers himself to be a main character, but also the self

of all people. Thus, Whitman's self is also the readers self. The reader's self is also the self of the democratic whole of the nation. These readers are "modern," meaning they are not the heroes of past epics.

Whitman puts his journey into context in *As I Ponder'd in Silence*. Like previous epic heroes, Whitman's own journey is a result of war. This is meant both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense, Whitman lived during the American Civil War, the bloodiest American war fought to date. The latter editions of *Leaves of Grass* were shaped in profound ways by the reality of war. In these early poems, some of which were written before the Civil War, Whitman means for this war to be figurative. His poetry is fighting a war both to be heard and to be taken to heart. His journey is the result of this fight.

The tone of *Leaves of Grass* varies throughout the book. It moves from ebullient to despairing, but this first section is a celebration of the land he is about to journey towards. Whitman means this in a physical sense and in a literary sense. He plans for his poems to traverse across the spiritual and democratic landscape of the nation in the same way one might travel through cities and towns. This is not a voyage of discovery, however, as Whitman already knows what is there. Instead, this is a celebration of the land and of its people.

4.2 Starting from Paumanok

Summary

Whitman begins his journey from "fish-shaped Paumanok where I was born…." He says that he has roamed many lands and now dwells in "Mannahatta" or in some withdrawn place where he can think and create away from the crowds. He becomes aware of the land around him; rivers like the Missouri and wonders like Niagara. He is solitary on his journey and he sets out "for a New World."

Life, Whitman proclaims, is "Victory, union, faith, identity, time… / …riches, mystery…." The "ancestor-continents" are together, far away, and Whitman stands on the "present and future continents…." These continents are "cover'd with the foremost people, arts, / institutions, known." Each American generation gives what is has and then passes on its work to a new generation. Whitman hears the future generations turning back to him "to listen…." Whitman tells all of America to "Take my leaves" to every corner of the nation and proclaim his message. He does take time to credit the "Dead poets, philosophs, priests" and the "Nations once powerful, now reduced" for all that those have given to create this new land. Whitman, however, proclaims that he stands in his own place and in his own day, separate from that history.

Whitman's "mistress" is the soul. Whitman says that his poems are written with the soul in mind. The poems are spiritual; they're of his body and of mortality but he will "then supply myself with the poems of my / soul and of immortality." He then lays out his plans for his poems: he will write for the States and for freedom. He will write for both the President and "the One form'd out of all." He will write for "contemporary lands" and for the hero workers of the "land and sea." His song will be of friendship and of the "manly love" felt between companions and comrades. This song will be for a love of "complete abandonment…."

His poems also include “the evil” and Whitman admits that he and his nation have a dark side as well. Evil is an important dimension to the self. Whitman declares that he begins a religion with these poems. Previous men have “yet been half devout enough” and none has done justice to religion. “The real and permanent grandeur of these States / must be their religion.” There is a “greater / religion” according to Whitman that comes from the earth. He invites his readers to join in the grandness of this new reality: “The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of / Religion.”

Whitman continues to describe the project of his poetry: he will “make the true poem of riches” that brings all into a togetherness of life and death. All things in the universe and nature are connected. No less than this is the focus on his poetry. All poems will have “reference to the soul.” Whitman compares the soul of a person to the type of a printer. The type leaves only an impression of words which contain the true meaning of a piece of writing just as the body is nothing but an outward impression of the inner reality of the soul. The body and the soul are interconnected and is “the meaning, the main / concern….”

Whitman proclaims that all the states and the regions are a part of him and he a part of them. He lists these “experienced sisters / and the inexperienced sisters” from Massachusetts to the South to the West to the “Arctic braced” and “Mexican breez’d” states. Whitman is their companion and arrives to be one with them. These poems contain the essence of each of these lands. The “arriere, the wigwam, the trail, the hunter’s hut, the / flat boat, the maize-leaf….” They contain “cities, solid, vast” as well as the natural settings of rural America and each will have him “lounging through the shops and fields….” Whitman calls on his reader to be his only companion and to “haste” in travel with him through these lands.

Analysis

Just as an adventurer would map their journey before setting out, so too did Whitman attempt to draw a poetic map of the territory he sought to explore. This is the purpose of “Starting from Paumanok.” Paumanok is the Native American name for Long Island, a place where Whitman spent much time during his childhood visiting family. It was on Long Island that Whitman first discovered the beauty and joy of the natural world, a world often very different from the urban landscape of Brooklyn, where he lived with his parents.

The use of this Indian name represents Whitman’s own search for origin. Whitman was concerned with the underlying reality of place. This reality was to be the starting point for his physical and spiritual journey. By placing his own starting point in Long Island, Whitman suggests that his journey began in childhood. By telling the reader that he now dwells in Mannahatta, the Native American name for Manhattan, Whitman gives an original place to the ending of his journey.

Starting from Paumanok can be read as an autobiographical section. One can see both a progression of age, from childhood thoughts and dreams to mature relationships between lovers, and it can be seen as a progression of subject. As the poem progresses the subject turns away from Whitman’s self and begins to become the reader’s self. This move is Whitman’s attempt to draw the reader into the work. This literary journey mirrors the spiritual journey on which Whitman hopes to take his reader. The reader starts as an objective observer, hearing Whitman

narrate his own life. By the end, the reader understands that Whitman's life and Whitman's journeys are the same as his or her own.

Whitman understands himself and his American characters to be a-historical, meaning that they stand outside of the time and space that seem to confine and constrict previous generations. This, Whitman believes, is a particular genius of the democratic experiment. He gives credence to the previous empires that laid the groundwork for the democratic United States, but he sees this democracy as the crowning achievement of civilization. This does not mean that Whitman believes his America to be some kind of perfect union for he is very aware of injustice and imperfection in society. Rather, Whitman sees the germ, or original thought, of perfection in this democratic land. It is even something for future generations to look back upon. Whitman encourages his future readers to remove themselves from their current contexts and histories in order to understand the original genius that he sees latent in the American landscape.

Whitman gives several maps for his work. In the first, he declares that he will write for the States and for freedom. This is his political purpose. These poems will attempt to define this unique democratic perfection that, though unrealized, is still present as potential energy. He then says he will write for Presidents and for the "One form'd out of all." This is meant to represent those singular individuals for whom Whitman will laud both real and physical people, and spiritual beings or realities. Finally, Whitman says that he will write of "manly love" and companionship. These will be the sections in which he praises love for others. In his own final analysis, it is this last theme that will encompass all others. By the end of *Starting From Paumanok,* Whitman has named the reader as his fellow sojourner. Whitman's words become spiritual, emotional, and even physical. He describes an engagement with his words as going forth "hand in hand" and that the reader will become his lover. This is the conclusion of the map, but it is the beginning of the actual journey.

4.3 Song of Myself

Summary

Whitman begins this poem by naming its subject – himself. He says that he celebrates himself and that all parts of him are also parts of the reader. He is thirty-seven years old and "in perfect health" and begins his journey "Hoping to cease not till death." He puts all "Creeds and schools in abeyance" hoping to set out on his own, though he admits he will not forget these things. Whitman then describes a house in which "the shelves are / crowded with perfumes" and he breathes in the fragrance though he refuses to let himself become intoxicated with it. Instead, he seeks to "go to the bank by the wood" and become naked and undisguised where he can hear all of nature around him.

Whitman says that he has heard "what the talkers were talking, the talk of the / beginning and the end," but he refuses to talk of either. Instead, he rejects talk of the past or future for an experience in the now. This is the "urge" of the world which calls to him. Whitman sees all the things around him – "The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old / and new," but he knows that "they are not the Me myself." He remembers in his own past that he once

“sweated through fog” with fashionable arguments. He no longer holds these pretensions, however.

Whitman then describes an encounter between his body and soul. He invites his soul to “loafe with me on the grass” and to lull him with its “valved voice.” He tells his soul to settle upon him, “your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d / over upon me…..” He invites his soul to undress him and reach inside him until the soul feels his feet. This will bring him perfect peace “that pass all the argument of the earth….” This peace is the promise of God and is what allows all people to become his brothers and sisters.

Whitman recalls a scene in which a child came to him with a handful of grass and asked him what it was. Whitman has no answer for the child. The grass is “the flag of my disposition” and it is the “handkerchief of the Lord….” It is also the child or a symbol for all of humanity. Whitman sees the grass sprouting from the chests of young men, the heads of old women, and the beards of old men. He remembers all those that have died and recalls that each sprout of grass is a memorial to those that have come before. Whitman reflects that “…to die is different from what any one supposed, and / luckier.”

Whitman then writes a parable. Twenty-eight young men bathe on a sea shore while a young woman, “richly drest” hides behind the blinds of her house on the water’s bank. She observes the men and finds that she loves the homeliest of them. She then goes down to the beach to bathe with them, though the men do not see her. “An unseen hand” also passes over the bodies of the young men but the young men do not think of who holds onto them or “whom they souse with spray.”

Whitman describes groups of people that he stops to observe. The first is a “butcher-boy” sharpening his knife and dancing. He sees the blacksmiths taking on their “grimy” work with precision. Whitman then observes a “negro” as he works a team of horses at a construction site. Whitman admires his chiseled body and “his polish’d and perfect limbs.” He sees and loves this “picturesque giant….” He admits in the next poem that he is “enamour’d…Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods, / Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes / and mauls… / I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.” In a lengthy section, Whitman describes the work of all people of the land – the carpenter, the duck-shooter, the deacons of the church, the farmers, the machinist, and many more. They often have hard, ordinary lives, yet Whitman proclaims that these people “tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them” and they all “weave the song of myself.”

Whitman describes himself as “old and young” and “foolish as much as…wise….” He is “Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man….” He is of all the land of North America from the South even into Canada. He notes that these are not his own original thoughts, however. These thoughts have been a part of the human condition for all of time. These thoughts are “the grass that grows wherever the land is…the common air that bathes the globe.” His thoughts are for all people, even those that society has considered outcasts.

Whitman wonders why he should adhere to the old ways – prayer or ceremony. He claims that he has “pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair” and found that nothing is as true and sweet as “my own bones.” Whitman understands himself. He is “august” and vindicated by his own

nature. “I exist as I am, that is, enough.” He does not have to explain his inconsistencies. Those are only to be accepted. “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” All pleasure and all pain are found within his own self. Whitman describes himself in the basest terms: “Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,” he does not feign interest in manners. He hears the “primeval” voices of democracy and mankind and gives himself over to these forbidden lusts. Above all, Whitman says, “I believe in the flesh and the appetites….”

Analysis

The first thing to note is that Whitman calls his poems “songs.” This insinuates that Whitman feels there is an audible quality to his work; that the true meanings of his poems will not be understood if they are not heard by a listener. Thus, Whitman feels as though he will not be understood as an individual if he is not heard by the world. *Song of Myself,* as the linchpin of this first half of *Leaves of Grass,* is his attempt to make himself heard.

Whitman’s subject is himself, but it is clear that Whitman means more than just his physical self. Whitman calls himself a universe of meanings. He uses the symbol of his naked self in nature to symbolize his own fusion with the world around him. Whitman’s self is the whole of America and the whole of nature. This is best seen in Whitman’s use of the catalog. A catalog is a literary device used in epic poetry as a rhetorical naming or inventory. Whitman uses a catalog in *Song of Myself* to name a variety of professions and people that he meets on his journey across the States. He says that he becomes part of these people and these people come to compose his own self.

In this section, Whitman first engages the idea of individuality and collectivity. The catalog is Whitman’s example of the collective. This refers back to his opening inscription in which Whitman proclaimed that his work is of the self, both the individual self and the democratic self. The collection of all people in the land forms a self that is distinct from the individual self, yet is similar in that it has its own soul and being.

Whitman uses the metaphor of grass in the sixth section of *Songs of Myself* to try and explain the democratic self. His explanation, he admits, is incomplete. Whitman describes a child coming to him and asking him what is the grass. He has no real answer, meaning that he cannot fully describe the democratic self to those that do not inherently understand it. Whitman can only tell the child that he sees the democratic self in young men and old women, meaning that he sees it in all people. Whitman then takes the metaphor one step farther, telling the child that even the grass that has died and has gone back to the earth is a part of the whole. *Song of Myself* balances the themes of individuality and collectivity as two important ingredients for the democratic experiment of America. This is Whitman’s political argument.

Whitman breaks up *Song of Myself* with a kind of parable. A parable is a short, succinct story that offers a moral or instructive lesson for its hearers. Whitman’s lesson is an erotic one and it is instructive to see how Whitman’s passion for democracy is equated with a sexual and erotic passion. A woman sees twenty-eight men bathing and lusts to be with them. When she joins them, they are together through the power of an “unseen hand.” Whitman uses shocking erotic images of the men and spraying water, a reference to male ejaculation, to arouse the reader.

Whitman is telling his readers that they must not only observe the democratic life but they must become one with it. This joining is both mysterious and erotic for those that take part.

Whitman closes *Song of Myself* by trying to name this large, democratic collectivity, yet he finds it impossible. He makes a point to let the reader know that he contradicts himself and that this democratic self is full of inconsistencies. Whitman understands very well that the democracy of America is imperfect, filled with injustice, self-serving, and undermined by the tyranny of the individual. He pares this democratic self down to its essentials: it is primal, the flesh and the appetites. Whitman continues *Leaves of Grass*with this carnal vision in the next sections.

4.4 Calamus, Song of the Open Road and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*

Summary

Whitman begins *Calamus* in September, 1859, alone in the woods, away from all of the "pleasures, / profits, conformities" of his life. It is in this place that he can reflect on his inner self. This is a truer self than the one of the ordinary world. He resolves to "sing no songs to-day but those of manly / attachment…." It is a celebration of his own "need of comrades." This time is also a time of reflection on the end of life. In "Scented Herbage of My Breast" he ponders leaves that grow above him. They are leaves of death and they are bitter, but this does not mean that death is not beautiful. Whitman says, "Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer…." Death is beautiful when a man does not live his life in service to it. Instead, Whitman is decisive in his wish to "make death / exhilarating" for his comrades and fellow travelers.

In *For You O Democracy,* Whitman makes the connection between America, the "continent indissoluble" and the friendship of which he sings. His goal is to create companionship in all of America. Cities will be filled with men bonded together in "manly love." As he wanders through the woods, Whitman can feel the spirits of his former friends beside him. Some embrace him while others stand around him. Whitman begins to pick up "tokens" of nature around him: a lilac, a pine branch, "some moss…pull'd off a live- / oak in Florida as it hung trailing down," some laurel leaves and some water from the pond. Whitman says that these are held near to him "by a thick cloud of spirits…." In *Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances,* Whitman speaks not of spirits but of real people, lovers with whom he travels. They hold his hand and sit with him and there is a sense "that words and / reason hold not…." Whitman gains his wisdom from these moments and from this love. The questions of life and death fade away.

In *The Base of All Metaphysics,* Whitman attempts to give a philosophical answer to the ideas of love and companionship that he writes about here. He imagines a college course, taught by a professor. The class studies all of the great philosophers of the world from Socrates to Christ to Hegel. All of these philosophies, Whitman says, are undergirded by "The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend / to friend…." Whitman hopes that it is this kind of "measureless….love" within him that will be the thing he is remembered for. He calls on his future biographers and recorders of history to note not his "songs" but his love for his friends.

It is only this love that can make Whitman happy. "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" is a reflection on this happiness. Whitman recalls the time he was honored in the capitol and a time

when he "carous'd" and when his "plans were / accomplish'd," yet he says still he is not happy. He is happy when he is in nature, rising with the sun, bathing in the ocean, and thinking of his dear friend, his lover, and how he is on his way over to see him. Whitman says that he is only happy when his arm is around his friend, when they lay together sleeping "In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams…."

Whitman sings a song for his beloved New York in *City of Orgies*. Manhattan is a city of "walks and joys" and Whitman sings his songs within the city and about it. What makes the city "illustrious" is not its buildings, homes, streets, or commerce. It is, instead, the love that the inhabitants of the city have for Whitman and the love that he shares with them. He sings of one particular New Yorker in *Behold This Swarthy Face*, who comes up and kisses him "lightly on the lips with robust love…." This is an act of robust love and this is a love that is saluted all over America. In *To a Stranger*, Whitman observes someone walking down the street and thinks that he must have known this person in some other time. This person gives him pleasure even though he does not know him. He is sure that he will meet this stranger again and that he will not lose this person again.

In a quiet moment, sitting alone, Whitman thinks of all the other men in the world sitting alone, "yearning and thoughtful." Whitman believes that if he could only know these men, he would become as "attached to them as I do to men in my own lands…." He yearns to be brothers with these men; to be happy with them. Whitman then responds to those that charge him with seeking "to destroy / institutions." He says that this is not his goal. Instead, he seeks to build up the institution of manly love in all the cities of the nation. Whitman says he does not envy important men – generals or the President or any rich or powerful person. Instead, he envies the "brotherhood of lovers" and those that maintain manly love throughout their lives.

Whitman makes *A Promise to California*. He tells California that he will soon go West because he knows that "I and robust love belong among you." First, however, he rejoices in his love of "a youth who loves me and whom I love." This youth comes to him in a crowded bar-room and holds his hand at a table. While others drink and swear, Whitman and his love speak little, "perhaps not a word" and enjoy being in silence with each other. He is not only smitten with this youth, however, but with all of the people of the nation. He longs to "infuse" himself amongst the workers and the blue-collar people of the land. In a dream, Whitman sees a "new city of Friends," a place not of this earth. In this city, nothing is greater than equality and love.

In *To the East and to the West*, Whitman proclaims, "I believe the main purport of these States is to found a superb / friendship, exalte" that is unknown in any other time or place. While in *Among the Multitude*, Whitman says he can feel one "picking me out by secret and divine signs." This person knows him and is his lover, his "perfect equal." For his own part, he feels a "subtle electric fire" when he is near this lover. Whitman ends *Calamus* by claiming he is "Full of Life Now." He speaks to past and future generations who will read these words and wish they could be his lover and tells them that through these words they can be certain that he is with them.

Song of the Open Road is Whitman's celebration of travel. He takes to the road "A foot and light hearted…Healthy, free, the world before me…." He is free to choose where he goes. Whitman feels as though he embodies his own journey. He is good fortune and does not need to ask for it.

“Strong and content I travel the open road.” He proclaims that the world around him – the earth and the constellations – come with him yet they do not have to support him.

To travel is to be free above all. Whitman “ordains” himself “loos’d of limits and imaginary lines….” He is, in the most real sense, master of his domain. He claims that he will listen to others, hear their words, but in the end he is divested “of the holds that would hold me.” Whitman even amazes himself. “I am larger, better than I thought / I did not know I held so much goodness.” Whitman seeks to give this goodness back to the world since the men and women of the world have done good to him while on his journey. Whitman proclaims that he will “scatter” himself amongst all people as if he were seed. If someone should deny him, he will not be troubled. If they accept him, and bless him, Whitman will reciprocate the reception and the blessing.

Whitman also has words of encouragement for his fellow travelers. He understands the journey, oftentimes, is difficult. “The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first….” He tells the traveler to “Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop’d….” He asks his fellow reader and traveler not to be convinced of this by “arguments, similes, rhymes” but to be convinced simply by Whitman’s own presence. Whitman assures his companion that all things of humankind – governments, religions, institutions - fall “into niches and corners before the procession of souls along the grand road.” The journey is always towards “something great.”

In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman takes on the stance of observer. Around him, he sees “Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes” and they are “curious” to him. They are on the hundreds and hundreds of ferry boats that cross between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Whitman sees all of them, and himself, as “disintegrated yet part of the scheme….” He sees that others will follow him, others will watch these people and these boats cross, fifty or even a hundred years, they will “enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the / falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.”

Whitman tells the “many generations hence” that he is with them. “Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd.” These future generations can trust that their experiences are the same as his own. Their observations of the beauty of the natural world around them are the same as his own. He wants these future people to know that he loved the cities, the rivers, and all the men and women that crossed between them. Whitman asks what it is between he and the future generations. “Whatever it is, it avails not – distance avails not, and place / avails not….” The “abrupt” questions that these future people feel, he also felt them. Whitman exhorts the river to “Flow on! Flow with the flood-tide,” and for the “masts of Mannahatta” to “Stand up, tall….” He asks the reader to consider that he himself might be looking back in some “unknown / ways….”

Analysis

The sexual nature of *Leaves of Grass* was fodder for great controversy during Whitman’s own life. Several high profile critics, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, found these themes less than desirable in the book. Whitman lost his government job in 1865 because his boss read his work and dismissed him for indecency. Through all of this, however, Whitman maintained that sexuality was vital to his own work precisely because it is a vital characteristic of the human

experience. Sexuality was not just an individual experience between two people according to Whitman; it was a foundational experience for how society is woven together.

Calamus is a reflection on male friendship and relationship. The name "Calamus" refers to an ancient Greek myth -- Calamus was a man who grieved for his young male lover and turned into a reed. That Whitman sees this friendship in erotic terms only shows the multiplicity of ways in Whitman understood true relationship. While much has been made of Whitman's use of homosexual imagery, a sexual viewpoint that was not widely talked of nor published during Whitman's day, the reader cannot overlook the fact that in previous sections, including *Song of Myself*, Whitman makes use of autoerotic and heterosexual imagery as well. This is what scholars have noted as Whitman's omnisexual viewpoint. No one sexual preference is complete for Whitman. Sexuality must include preference for the individual, for the different, and for the same.

The first poems of *Calamus* see Whitman reevaluating some of the themes from previous sections, especially his understanding of the natural world. If the child's poem from "Song of Myself," in which the child brings a handful of grass to Whitman in order to ask what it is, is instructive of the fact that Whitman understands humanity's relationship with the natural world, than "Calamus" represents a break with that understanding. Whitman begins in nature, observing the trees and the leaves around him, yet he does not feel a part of it. There is death and life in those leaves, he understands, but this does not seem to be as vital to him as it did before. Instead, he is infused with the desire for friendship. This is also a reevaluation of the Romantic spirit in American literature. While previous poets and writers, taking cues from their European forebears, found a true spirituality in the mysteries of nature, Whitman finds that he cannot find the true self in nature alone. Truth is only to be found in the bonding of men.

Whitman's historical context is also important for understanding this section of the book. This is one of the only poems in the book in which Whitman gives a specific date for reference, 1859. It is notable that this is the same year that Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published. As the classic text on the theory of evolution, Darwin's book is considered to be revolutionary in the fields of biological science. The theories that Darwin put in print, however, were already widely discussed in intellectual circles of Whitman's day. In science and psychology (whose original manifestation was phrenology, a discipline which Whitman studied), there was a growing understanding that sexuality was a trigger for all biological actions and interior feelings.

Whitman sought to take this understanding from the scientific disciplines and make it relevant to the philosophical and literary disciplines. This is the best reading of *The Base of All Metaphysics*. Whitman's reading of the great philosophers and religious leaders is not materialist in any way. Instead, Whitman understands the basis of all life as the interwoven relationships between people. His own songs are but manifestations of this love between friends. This love is manifested in *When I Heard at the Close of the Day*. This is a poem of consummated love between Whitman and his male friend. Through this act of sexual consummation, both also are consummated with nature suggesting that the relationship between men that Whitman experiences is the root of an equilibrium between all natural things.

The reader, however, cannot only read *Calamus* as an expression of carnal lust and base desire. The ending gives a correction to any who might do so. The last poems of the section take on a social dimension. While the first poems exemplified a deep and personal love, Whitman equates this personal, sexual love with the social love that he shares for all people. He thinks of all the men that he could be friends with and decides that he is united with them. He promises California that he will come and visit and envisions being united with all the working men and women of land. By the end of *Calamus*, the reader understands that the sexual impulse is, in reality, a democratic impulse.

In *Song of the Open Road*, Whitman moves from an individual perspective to what we today might consider a global perspective. This is a broadening of his subject from previous poems. While Whitman has claimed in previous verse to be singing a song of America, in Song of the Open Road he shows that all people of the earth are in his purview and that his teachings can be understood beyond the democratic states. While the United States has been built as a country on the concept of freedom, Whitman wants his readers to understand that there is a strong urge of the individual that is present within the concept of freedom. Whitman cannot be tied down to the difficulties of the earth, to institutions or rules. To be free means that one loses the constraints of these old things and Whitman offers himself as the best example. His imagery of scattering seed is a metaphor for planting and for impregnating the imagination with his teachings.

If *Song of the Open Road* is an ode to individuality, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* is Whitman's expression *par excellence* of the collective. *Brooklyn Ferry* features two characters – Whitman and You, the reader. The poem begins descriptively but, by the end of the first section, has introduced a conversational tone between Whitman and the reader. There is a personal dimension to the conversation and the setting seems to be more private than in previous poems addressed to a wide audience. Whitman balances an understanding of the reader as a close and personal friend, the kind of erotic relationship he described in *Calamus*, yet also a friend spread across time and space.

A central meaning to the poem is elusive except to say that, in watching the crowds cross Brooklyn's river, Whitman is reminded of the fact that all things he experiences have been and will be experienced by all others. Whitman uses images of the world – rivers and suns, crowds and individuals – all as part of a larger "scheme." These things have been placed within the poet and he understands that they will also be placed inside of the reader. In this way, Whitman knows that he has gained a spiritual unity with the world and with those that came before and will come after. This theme was important to many of the New England Transcendentalist writers and poets of the nineteenth century. Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay *Nature* is, perhaps, the best example. Where Emerson sought to find a divine, unifying spirit in the natural world, however, Whitman finds it in the crowds of New York.

4.5 Sea-Drift and *By the Roadside*

Summary

Whitman begins the *Sea-Drift* section with the poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*." It is a song of "reminiscence" of the poet's childhood and how it would influence his later life.

Whitman uses memories of his boyhood – patches of "briers and blueberries," of birds that once sang to him, and from an image of the moon "late-risen and swollen as if / with tears" to paint a picture of a bucolic upbringing. For his boyhood self, the world is full of wonder and he understands that there is the beginning of a yearning in his heart. He flashes forward to the present but admits that even as a man there is still a boy inside of him.

Whitman then recounts a story from his childhood. One summer, while staying on Paumanok, two birds, "feather'd guests from Alabama," make their nest by the sea. Quietly, the boy goes each day to observe them, "Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating." The birds sing a song of joy because they are together. Neither north winds nor south winds, day or night, can make them care for the world. All that matters is their love for each other.

One day, however, the boy finds that the female bird does not return to her nest. In fact, the female bird never appears again. After this, the boy hears a new song from the male bird, now "The solitary guest from Alabama." The he-bird cries out to the winds to blow his mate back to him. Each night he would sing this song and "pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know." The he-bird's song is a sorrowful one. One night, he thinks that he sees his mate "fluttering out among the breakers," but it is not her. The bird cries to the sea and to the land to return his love, but it is useless.

The world continues on, however, and Whitman hears the "moans" of the "fierce old mother" sea each day. He sees the "yellow half-moon" as it sags over the sea and he is ecstatic with love now loosed by the bird's sad song. He does not know if the bird is a "Demon or bird," because it has spoken such truth that has penetrated his soul and "A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die." The song is death and he hears it in the sea each day and night. It is that bird's song, Whitman says, that sparked his own songs, songs of death (the "sweetest word").

Whitman then recalls a different time in his life in *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*. In this poem, Whitman speaks of difficult times. He walks along the shores of Paumanok, hearing the "fierce old mother" crying out for all her castaway children and is struck by "the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot / The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the / land of the globe." His eyes follow all of refuse washed ashore and think of "the old thought of / likenesses…."

As he walks, he reflects on all the old spirits of the beach and of the sea and he is struck with the realization that he is much like the "wash'd up drift" that his eyes follow. Whitman suddenly feels oppressed by the inadequacies of his work because he has "not once had the least idea who or what" he is or what his work means. He calls his poems "arrogant" and declares that his real self cannot be revealed by these poems or by anything else. It is not just himself that he has not perceived correctly, however, but no thing, "not a sing /object…no man ever can…." Whitman then releases himself to Paumanok, to the nature, and to the ocean. He begs for nature to be gentle to him and to continue to reveal itself to him for his intentions are well meant.

The poem *Aboard at a Ship's Helm* sees the poet aboard a ship, watching a young pilot guide the ship "with care" through a fog. There is a warning bell and Whitman praises the bell for giving "good notice" of danger ahead. The pilot turns the boat away from danger and "The

beautiful and noble ship with all her precious wealth / speeds away gaily and safe." The "precious wealth" that Whitman speaks of is "the immortal ship," the "ship aboard the ship," the soul. Now on the beach and listening to the sea Whitman is reminded of "All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future."

Whitman begins *By the Roadside* in Boston watching a military parade. He yells for "Jonathan," a common name for a New England Yankee, to clear the way for the "President's marshal…for the government canon…for the Federal foot and dragoons….." He sees the American flag march down the street while Yankee Doodle plays. War veterans, some with missing limbs, hobble down the street. The show calls "the dead out of the earth!" Whitman proclaims that there is "one thing that belongs here" and he says that he will whisper it to the Mayor who will go to Parliament and "Dig out King George's coffin" and bring his bones back to Boston. The people will then reconstruct the bones and place a crown on the skeleton's head. Whitman tells Jonathan that he is a "made man from this day…."

The poems *Gods* and *Germs* take on a metaphysical bent. Whitman cries for the "Ideal Man" to become his God. He asks death, "all great ideas, the races' aspirations," and all great deeds of mankind to become his Gods. He then calls on all the wonders of the earth, the "Forms, qualities, lives, humanity, language, thoughts" as "the virtue, the germs of all." These, Whitman proclaims, are the beginnings of all creation and being.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer is Whitman's critique of organized knowledge. He listens to this "learn'd astronomer" and the facts and figures this person uses in his teaching. This knowledge makes Whitman feel "tired and sick and he wanders off to be by himself where in "the mystical moist night-air" he looks up and observes the stars. Whitman's reaction to such learning seems to be nihilistic in *O Me! O Life!* He despairs over the "cities fill'd with the foolish" and for those that seek the light of understanding but struggle to ever obtain it. The answer to this despair: "that life exists and identity, / That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a / verse."

Whitman's poems then turn to the political and social. He speaks directly to the President in *To a President*, telling him that he has not lived up to the responsibilities of his office. He has not "learn'd of Nature – of the politics of Nature…." *To Rich Givers* is a poem of thanks to those that have supported and given shelter to him as he has travelled across the United States.

In a series of short poems, Whitman combines his metaphysical thoughts with his social and political realism. *Roaming in Thought* is a meditation on the universe brought about by reading Hegel. *A Child's Amaze* remembers his awe as a young boy listening to a preacher's sermons on God. "The Runner" is an observation of a man with "sinewy…muscular legs" as he runs along a roadside. Whitman sings odes to mothers and their children, to beautiful women, and to the thoughts of justice and equality of all humanity.

Whitman ends the section with an indictment of the country's political culture. In *To the States*: *To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad*, Whitman proclaims that the administrations of former presidents have failed the country. He indicts the Congress and the judiciary for their failings in holding together a divided country. Whitman declares that he will sleep awhile, "for I see that these States sleep…."

Analysis

Sea Drift chronicles a kind of mystical evolution that Whitman sees occurring in the world around him. The passage of time is an important theme. The lead poem, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, is a recollection by the poet of his childhood and of the critical moments which inspired his own art. Whitman's boyhood is forever tied to his Paumanok (Long Island) and the sea culture that is found there. Thus, Whitman's childhood is tied up within the sea and the endlessly rocking cradle is a metaphor for the ocean. This is not only a reference to Whitman's own beginnings, but also to the beginnings of creation. In this poem, the past and the present are always related. One always influences the other.

"Out of the Cradle" has been called Whitman's masterpiece of free verse. As an ideal, the subject and the form of free verse should give support to each other. This poem is an excellent example of Whitman's mastery of this technique. The opening lines of the poem recreate the creation narrative. The endlessly rocking cradle is the "formless depths" of the Book of Genesis; the poet is Adam, the first man, being formed from the earth. The seashore is Whitman's own Eden.

The story of the he-bird and she-bird is a story of awakening told in two parts. In the first part, the two birds sing of their joined love for each other. These are songs that teach the young poet of celebration. The reader remembers the opening "Inscriptions" and the celebratory songs of love written there. The second part of the bird story is more difficult to hear. The he-bird has lost his love and the song now sung is full of grief and longing. This is an instructive song as well, however, as the boy learns that love is a multifaceted thing. It is dangerous and sometimes painful, yet it is full even then. These two songs complete the "aria" with which Whitman closes "Out of the Cradle." The completion of the life-cycle is death and, ultimately, this is what Whitman finds in the sea. The sea is the "old mother" which rocked him and nurtured him, yet it is also a reality of the end of life. Whitman closes in reflections: it is his witness of this life, love, and death that creates him as a poet.

In contrast to *Sea-Drift* or *Song of Myself*, there is no one unifying theme of *By the Roadside*. Instead, it is a collection of poems on various themes. If there is one connecting idea, it is that the poet is an observer of life, bestowed with a special knowledge of people and events that others are not privileged to or have forgotten. This is evident in the opening poem taking place during a Boston patriotic parade. As he watches the flags and soldiers march through the streets, Whitman knows that he has a fundamental understanding of democracy that is missing in this parade. He decides to whisper this understanding to the mayor who, given this powerful knowledge, takes the drastic measure of digging up King George's bones in a kind of ritualistic reenactment of the Revolutionary War. This understanding is the knowledge that democracy lives continually. It is not simply an act, such as war, to be memorialized. Understanding this makes all citizens "made" men.

This theme is given variation in *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer* and *O Me! O Life!* The unifying meaning here is that the poet, Whitman, has a crucial understanding of things that he knows his observed subject does not. "Learn'd Astronomer" is an indictment of an education system that only teaches numbers and figures and which hides truth more than reveals it. This deficiency in learning becomes a sickness for all of the citizenry and Whitman witnesses cities

filled with foolish people. They have only an inkling of true knowledge and the reader can hear Whitman's own desire to impart his vision of truth amongst the people.

Through *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman maintains a high regard for the power of institutions, even if he is distrustful of institutions themselves and chooses not to be a part of them. This regard for political institutions is evident in the closing poem, *To the States: To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad.* Whitman's tone is critical in this poem but only because he recognizes the profound influence and power that the office of the President exerts over the future of the nation. The poem is an indictment of the Buchanan administration who Whitman accuses of "sleeping" through the growing divisions in the states: divisions which would eventually lead to war. His poem is a cry for the next three Presidents to right the ship and uphold justice in a tired and divided nation.

4.6 Drum-Taps

Summary

The prelude to *Drum Taps* is an ode to New York, Whitman's home. He sings an ode to the city for being the first ones to arms when the duties of war called. The city, he reports, did not hesitate to send its men to war. Whitman recounts how he had seen soldiers parading through the city for forty years, but with "…news from the south… A shock electric," the young men, the lawyers, the judges, the drivers, the salesmen, and squads of other common or noble men took up arms and marched to war. Whitman loves each of these men for their bravery and willingness to take up "a manly life in the camp." "Mannahatta" smiles for all its men.

Whitman then imagines the year 1861 as a soldier, marching into battle. No "dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses" will describe this year. Whitman can only imagine the year as a "strong man erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, / carrying a rifle on your shoulder." He sees the year as one of Manhattan's city dwellers and he sees this year move across the West, into the Mid-West, through Pennsylvania and into Tennessee and Chattanooga. 1861 is a "hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year."

In his call to arms, *Beat! Beat! Drums!* Whitman calls on the sounds of drums and bugles to pierce every silent place, to leave no person undisturbed with their noise. They must disturb the churches, the schools, the farms, and those that are in love. If anyone tries to do anything resembling normal life – if the brokers and speculators continue their trade, if the lawyers attempt to argue a case in court, or if a singer attempts to sing – they must be drowned out by the sound of the drums and the bugles. They must "rattle quicker, heavier drums – you bugles wilder blow."

Song of the Banner at Daybreak is a beck and call between a poet, a Banner and Pennant, a father, and a child. The poet begins the poem by announcing that his "new song, a free song," flies freely in the open air along side the flapping banner and pennant. The poet will "weave the chord and twine in, / Man's desire and babe's desire" and will give powerful verse to inspire those that hear it. The pennant cries out to the poet and to the child to "come up here" and to "fly in the clouds and winds…." The child wants to know what it is that calls out to him from the sky, but the father tells the child that it is nothing. The valuable things, he points out, are the "dazzling things in the houses" and in the stores, "the vehicles preparing to crawl along the

streets / with goods….” These are the things that the earth envies. The child cries to the father that the banner and pennant call out, that it is alive and full of people. The father hushes the child and says to only behold “the well-prepared pavements” and to mark “the solid- / wall’d houses.” The banner and pennant cry to the bard to speak to the child and to all children. They ask if they are “mere strips of cloth profiting nothings, / Only flapping in the wind?”

The poet replies that he does not see only strips of cloth. Instead, he hears “the tramp of armies…the jubilant shouts of millions of men….” The banner and pennant cry out for liberty. The poet says that he has seen the results of peace, the great economic and social profit of the thirty eight states. The pennant represents war, however, and now “the halyards have rais’d it” and peace has been discarded “over all the sea and land.” The banner and the pennant cry for the poet to go “louder, higher, stronger” in his song. They ask the bard to show the children that they do not represent wealth and prosperity alone, but also war and “death supreme.”

The child tells the father that he does not like the money or the houses, only the banner and pennant flying high above it all. This anguishes the father, for he knows that these pennants are symbols of death and calls for the child to go and fight. The poet declares that he now understands the meaning of the banner and the pennant because a child taught him. They are not “houses of peace” or prosperity; they are also symbols of the destruction of the houses and the prosperity. The poet declares that he will sing only of this banner and pennant flying high over the country.

Whitman has an answer for war in *Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice*. He says that, in the end, “affection” will “solve the problems of freedom….” Through love, the nation will become one again and “Columbia” will be victorious. Whitman mocks those that think the answer to the conflict of war will be found in “lawyers,” or an “agreement on a paper…or by arms…” Only through partnership and the “love of lovers” will there be unity. In the poem “Reconciliation,” Whitman’s tone is low and sad. He regrets that “my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead…” The realities of war have eternal consequences.

Analysis

Whitman wrote the majority of *Drum-Taps* in 1865, just before the end of the American Civil War and before President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Whitman had mentioned in several previous sections of *Leaves of Grass* that for all the promise that he saw in the democratic American experiment, it was still only promise. Injustice, especially in the form of Southern slavery, meant that all persons were not able to experience the true forms of individuality that made collective freedom a reality. The Civil War changed this idea for Whitman and “Drum-Taps” is both his chronicle of this bloody war and his understanding of how the promise of America changed because of the war.

There is no fixed tone to *Drum-Taps*. Whitman begins in a celebratory mode. He exalts the bravery and willingness to fight of the residents of New York. These celebratory poems seem to mirror an excitement in the nation as a whole that evil would be overcome by good. As *Drum-Taps* moves forward, the reader can sense the passage of time in war as well. Whitman provides scenes of war and what he sees is not often celebratory. 1861 is a particularly difficult year; January, 1861 saw the secession of most of the Confederate states from the Union. The attack on

Fort Sumter, South Carolina, occurred in April. By that summer, the first major battles of the war had begun and it was apparent that there would be no easy victory. Whitman's poems take on this darker tone.

An important theme from *Drum-Taps* is the idea that war is all-encompassing. He writes in *Beat! Beat! Drums!* that the sounds of battle awaken and disturb everybody. No institution of society is left untouched by the duty of just war. *Drum-Taps*, perhaps, comes closest to naming the anxiety that Whitman feels for his country and for his society. In this section, he does not laud the common working man but, instead, calls out those that would rather be busied by their trade than fight for their freedoms. Whitman's gentler message is discarded here for a fervent and urgent one. All people of America (Whitman is specifically addressing the Northern Union) must come together to ensure that the promise of democracy.

Whitman uses several poems in a narrative mode in order to help tell the story of the country during the war. One such poem is *Song of the Banner at Daybreak*. Whitman uses the personification of battle flags to elaborate on a national conversation taking place during the war between people and generations. The tension is between the comforts of consumerism and the calls of national duty, or patriotism. The father of the poem seeks to shelter his son from the harsh reality of war, and from death, by encouraging his son to avoid patriotic callings. The world, the father says, wants only the goods and advancements won by democracy. The banner and the pennant, however, understand that comfort is won only through bloodshed. The poet, therefore, becomes the intermediary, explaining to the boy the meaning of patriotic duty. This is undoubtedly the role in which Whitman cast himself. He became an explainer of patriotic duty to those that would prefer comfort they did not fight for.

As the war ends, Whitman's tone turns more somber. He understands the price that has been paid by all those who have fought. He thinks repeatedly of death in these closing poems, best exemplified by *Reconciliation.* The proud and celebratory tone of these early poems is muted. He uses the feminine personification of America by calling her "Columbia." This calque on the word "America" is used in order to reinstate the sense of adventurous promise that had been put on hold during the war. Whitman attempts to balance the ending of *Drum-Taps* with a somber reflection on the life that was taken in order for the promise of democracy to once again flourish.

4.7 Memories of President Lincoln and *Autumn Rivulets*

Summary

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd is a long poem commemorating the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Whitman recounts the time when the lilacs last bloomed and the "great star" shone in the sky. This is the time that he mourned and "thought of him I love." The star that Whitman sees is a "powerful western fallen star!" A harsh cloud surrounds him and holds his soul so that the light of it no longer shines. In a field, Whitman takes a "sprig" of lilac.

Whitman tells of the journey that Lincoln's coffin takes through the land. It travels through the "breast of the spring, the land, amid cities" and through nature. The cities are "draped in black" and all of the people mourn. A thousand voices raise in a dirge for the fallen man. As the coffin

passes, Whitman places his sprig of lilac on top of it. This is not only lilac for Lincoln, however. Whitman says that he picks the lilac and places it over "the coffins all of you O death."

Whitman cries out that he has no words or songs to memorialize this man that he has loved. He does not know what to hang on the walls of the burial chamber, or what the pictures should look like. He imagines scenes of the vast prairies of the West with flowing rivers and he imagines the cities and the scenes of busy life. He thinks of the sun that shines over all the cities, "enveloping man and land." He hears the song of a "gray-brown bird" that sounds as freedom, though "the lilac with mastering odor holds me."

Whitman remembers the day when, staring out at the natural world and the ships sailing by, he saw the great cloud of death and its "long black trail…." With this knowledge of death, Whitman flees to the shores and the swamps and "ghostly pines so still." There, the gray-bird found him and it sang "the carol of death, and a verse for him I love." The bird's song is a call to death, to come and soothe him. The bird praises the "fathomless universe" and all it holds. This "Dark mother" is "always gliding near with soft feet" and so the bird brings an unfaltering melody to welcome it.

In a vision, Whitman sees "battle-corpses, myriads of them" and the "white skeletons of young men" all at rest, not suffering. Those that suffered were the wives and children and friends of the dead. The armies that remained suffered. As the night and darkness leave, Whitman leaves the lilac with the spring. He stops his song but remembers the "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of m soul, / There is the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim."

In a rousing poem, *O Captain*! *My Captain*! Whitman compares Lincoln to a ship's captain. The ship has come through many hardships, and Whitman cries for the Captain to see the port and hear the people's cries, but the Captain has fallen dead on the deck. Whitman cries for his Captain to rise up, to see that the "flag is flung" and the "bugle trills." He believes it must only be a dream that the Captain has fallen. The Captain, however, is "pale and still" and does not answer the cries of others. The "ship is anchor'd safe and sound" and Whitman tells everyone that the shores should "exult" and the bells should ring, but that he will only mournfully tread the deck of the ship.

Whitman changes directions in the *Autumn Rivulets* section and engages a broad array of subjects. In *There Was a Child Went Forth*," Whitman tells of a child that sees an object for the first time and lets that object become a part of him for a day, or for many years. Thus, the lilacs and the grass and the lambs and the water-plants all became a part of his life and of him. As the boy grows up, more and more things become a part of his understanding – the apple-trees, an "old drunkard staggering home," and "the tidy and fresh-cheek'd girls…." The child's parents, however, gave the child even more than this. They gave themselves. The family, in fact, gave the boy "the sense of what is real, / the thought if after all it should prove unreal…."

In *Miracles,* Whitman turns around the question of whether miracles exist. Whitman asks "who makes much of a miracle?" because, for him, there is nothing but miracles in the world. All of nature, the trees, the animals and birds and even the insects – all are miraculous things. Talking with anyone that he loves, or sleeping in the bed at night with someone he loves, is a miracle.

All of light and dark is miraculous and the sea is "a continual miracle." Whitman asks, "What stranger miracles are there?"

Whitman asks "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" Is it "The stupid and the wise thinker, parents and offspring… / Editor, author, artist, and schoolboy…?" The problem that Whitman encounters is that he hears of "abstracted" and beautiful things, yet these things are so beautiful that he cannot tell another or himself what these beautiful things are. Whitman denies that there could have been a plan or an architect that could have built such a world, nor does he believe that "seventy years if the time of a man or woman…." Everyone, in fact, is immortal, "And that my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each / other without every seeing each other" is also a wonderful and beautiful truth. In the poem "Tests," Whitman says that all "submit to them" everyone and at all times. It is not traditions or authorities that are ultimate judges, but it is what is "forever in themselves…."

In *Proud Music of the Storm,* Whitman seeks to bridge "the way from Life to Death…." In a dream, Whitman hears the sounds of music – organs blasting and voices rising – point towards the greatness of nature around everyone. Though each person has strayed from their true nature, and the separation between life and death has been long, the journey is now complete and "man and art with Nature" is "fused again." Whitman awakes from his dream of music and speaks to his own soul to go "refresh'd amid the day" in order to cheerfully acknowledge life. This heavenly dream has nourished him for the day ahead and for all of life.

Analysis

The end of *Drum-Taps* takes a tone of somber reflection on the death and destruction caused by the Civil War. This leads naturally into Whitman's *Memories of President Lincoln*. In Lincoln, Whitman saw the ideal American. He was a genius for his understanding of the American political landscape and a hero for going to war in order to protect the unity of the nation. Whitman's "Memories" became quite famous during his own lifetime, suggesting that he tapped into an understanding of this great figure.

In *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,* Whitman uses the western star to symbolize Lincoln. He also uses lilacs as a metaphor for the grief that he and his fellow citizens feel over his death. "When Lilacs" is an elegy, a mournful poem or lament for the dead. The structure of the poem makes use of Whitman's free verse, yet is also mimics a controlled ritual of grief on the verge of bursting into throes of agony. Traditional elegies end with the poet reconciled to death and "When Lilacs" ends this way as well.

The tension of "When Lilacs" comes from the poet's desire to reconnect with the world around him. It is the "scent of the lilacs," the palpable state of grief, that keeps him from being able to do so. A bird once again plays an important role, singing of life and death and carrying the song of the world to the poet. It is a reminder to him of the world for which he has sung in previous sections of his book. Just as the bird's song in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" caused an inner awakening for the young Whitman, this bird again reawakens his spirit and allows him to reconsider his grief.

It is ironic that the poem considered as Whitman's most famous, *O Captain! My Captain!* is also the least representative of his style. The metaphor in this poem is straightforward: Whitman

compares Lincoln to the fallen captain of a ship that has just come through great distress. Though he, and the nation, sing celebratory songs of safe passage, the captain is not able to share in the celebration. It is the style of the poem that is unlike Whitman. He uses a much more structured verse and rhyme scheme here than in any other part of *Leaves of Grass.* This poem resembles iambic pentameter, the meter often used in epic poetry, not the free verse in which the rest of the book is written.

Autumn Rivulets changes the pace of the book. Whitman moves away from the somber themes of *Drum-Taps* and his *Memories of President Lincoln* to reassess his journey and the events along the way. In *There Was a Child Went Forth*, he offers his own theory of pedagogy. A person experiences the world, he says, by becoming a part of the things that he or she experiences. This is not necessarily a new theme as the reader can see this awakening in previous poems. The new dimension comes from Whitman's understanding of the familial structure as a source of learning and personhood. The child does not just appropriate the natural world and the lessons of nature (as he did in "Out of the Cradle"); he also takes on the characteristics of his parents. This poems can be understood in the individual sense or in the collective sense, the child becoming the growing American population and the parents the traits bestowed by the particular democratic spirit.

Autumn Rivulets is also a section proclaiming a new start. This was a particularly important theme for Whitman in the post war years. Autumn is a metaphor for the regeneration of the nation after the war. The dying leaves of autumn, in this case, are the thousands of fallen war dead. The tree, the root of democracy, however, remains alive. Just as the earth becomes regenerated out of the dying leaves that turn to dust, so too will the nation become new because of the war dead. In this way, death is turned into a new beginning.

4.8 From Noon to Starry Nights and *Songs of Parting*

Summary

Whitman sings of a hot October sun in *Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling*. He tells the sun that he has always loved it, even as a boy, and that now as a man he may launch his "invocation" to it. Whitman says that he understands the sun, how "before the fitting man all Nature yields" and Whitman says that he knows its flames and "perturbations" well. In *Faces*, Whitman speaks of crossing the country and encountering a multitude of faces of the people he passes. He sees the brave and sturdy faces of the laborers and common people of the land, yet he also sees the disgusting and "slobbering" faces of death and evil. All of these faces "show their descent from the Master himself…are all deific….."

Whitman describes a "wild trumpeter" in the poem *The Mystic Trumpeter*. He is a "strange musician" and Whitman calls him to blow "free and clear" so that he can follow. Whitman calls on the trumpeter to take on the "pulse of all" and to let the theme of love be his only song. All love is worth singing of, "Love, that is all the earth to lovers – love, that mocks time and space…." Whitman begins to think that he is, himself, "the instrument thou playest" since his heart and soul have melted in the song. The trumpeter's song turns dark and Whitman takes on the songs of all those that are oppressed in the whole earth. All of the "measureless shame and

humiliation of my race" becomes his to bear. Whitman calls on the trumpeter to give him a vision to renew his soul. In a "culminating song" the trumpeter plays a song of victory, a song in which "reborn races appear" and Whitman is filled with joy.

In *Mannahatta* Whitman sings a song for his city. He recounts asking "for something specific and perfect" for his city. This is when he encounters its "aboriginal name." This name shows him something new of his city, that "the word of my city is that word from of old" and embodies all that the city has been and will be. This hurried city with its boats and commerce and immigrants is his city. It is "A million people – manners free and superb – open voices -- / hospitality – the courageous and friendly young men….."

Whitman boasts in his own way in *Excelsior*. He asks, "Who has gone farthest? For I would go father." He goes through a list of traits, from cautiousness, to happiness, to boastfulness and says that he would outdo all in their extremes. It is he that makes hymns "fit for the earth" and is "mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole / earth." Whitman's thought is more reflective in *Weave In, My Hardy Life* as he admits that "We know not what the use O life, nor know the aim…." He only admits that we must always go on "the death-envelp'd march….."

Whitman begins with a foreboding tone in the section entitled *Songs of Parting*. He seems to despair that the time of his life "draws nigh" and that his travels will one day cease. Yet, he ends this first poem, *As the Time Draws Nigh*, with the thought that his soul has "positively appear'd – that is enough." In *Years of the Modern*, Whitman takes on a grander view of history. He sees millions of men marching through time, across "frontiers and boundaries of the old aristocracies broken" and he decides that these modern, democratic people are "more like God" than ever before. America has grown to be a light where Europe had dimmed and retired "in shadow behind me…."

Whitman remembers those millions of marching men in *Ashes of Soldiers.* He asks the "Phantoms of countless lost" to never desert him while he lives. His love or these fallen comrades is pervasive through time, even if their sacrifice is lost and gone in memory. Whitman then takes the time to chastise those that would only look to previous ages for inspiration while ignoring the genius of the American age. These historians "hold despairingly yet to the models departed, caste, myths, obedience…" while ignoring the modern "athletes, the Western States" and the "freedom or spirituality" of this great nation. Those that shed their blood to unite the Union stays ever in Whitman's mind.

Whitman reflects on the end of a day as a symbol of the end of his own life. Everything, he says, is "illustrious;" everything is "Good in all." For Whitman, to live is wonderful and to die is also wonderful. "Wonderful to depart! / Wonderful to be here!" Breathing the daytime air is "delicious" while preparing for sleep is to be "satisfied." It is an incredible existence, he says, to both be a God and "To have gone forth among other Gods, these men and women I love." These men and women he celebrates, just as he celebrates himself. Even after he is gone, all things continue. Whitman looks around at his life and at the world around him and sees nothing but beauty; there is no thing that is "lamentable at last in the universe."

Whitman concludes his book with the poem, *So Long*. He reflects on his journey and announces "what comes after me." He says that his due will come "When America does what was promis'd / When through these States walk a hundred million of superb persons…." In summation, he says that he has sung of "the body and the soul," of "war and peace," and of "life and death." In the end, Whitman says that his poems announce the best in all humanity and the best in the nation. He calls for people to rise up in justice and for the Union to become "more and more compact, indissoluble…."

Whitman knows that his songs are now ceasing, not only because this book is closing but because his life is ending as well. He wants the reader to know, however, that "Camerado, this is no book / Who touches this touches a man," and that by reading this work he himself leaps "from the pages into your arms…." As he professes his love for the reader, he reminds them that he might one day return. For now, he is "disembodied, triumphant, dead."

Analysis

Like other sections of *Leaves of Grass,* the poems comprising *From Noon to Starry Nights* come from all periods during Whitman's career. This section is, in a way, a review of many of the previous themes that he has engaged throughout the book. *Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling* is an ode to the sun. This can be understood as Whitman's own cry for light in the closing years of his own life. He calls for the "perturbations" of the sun that inspired his earlier work to come now and inspire these later poems as well. Whitman uses the contrast of day and night to describe a particular period in his own life from which is now able to judge his earlier work (light) while understanding that his own death is imminent (night). Whitman engages the same themes in his poem of a wild trumpeter. The music has led him in many directions and he calls for the notes to be clear now and to guide his way.

In these poems, the reader finds Whitman varying in theme and tone. The reader almost does not recognize Whitman in *Excelsior* he takes on a boastful voice and the tone is perhaps the book's most vibrant and celebratory since the opening poems of *Drum-Taps.* This celebration is countered with meditation and calm reflection on life. Whitman is truly showing the reader both the day and the night in these poems. Each is quite different from the other.

The poems in *Songs of Parting,* while taken from various points in Whitman's career, are organized in order to highlight the theme of closure and farewell. *So Long*! is the most well known of these closing poems. In this, Whitman gives a summation of his work – "I have sung the body and the soul, war and peace have I sung, and the songs of life and death." While he has traversed many themes and literary landscapes throughout the work, this line is his attempt to capture an essence of the book.

This final poem is also a reminder of the promise that Whitman sees in the American democratic experiment. By the end of *Leaves of Grass,* it is undoubtedly true that this promise has been fought for and hard won. What stands out most of all here is Whitman's continued belief in the perfectibility of the United States. Though he has gone through the most turbulent period in the nation's history, he remains unwavering in his belief that American democracy, once fulfilled, will be the shining achievement of humanity. It is the culmination of the realization of the individual and the collective population. Each support and sustain the other.

So Long! is Whitman's goodbye, but as he announced in his previous poems, his parting is not forever. Instead, this is a parting goodbye for the time being. Whitman announces himself once again to the personal reader and the closing lines read as if they are a personal note from the author. He implores the reader to not see these poems as simply a book; instead, they are a manifestation of Whitman himself. Whitman wrote in his autobiographical letters that he was less concerned with *Leaves of Grass* being taken seriously as a literary work than he was with the book becoming a chronicle of a life. It is both his life, the life of his country, and the life of his reader.

5. Whitman's Contribution to American Literature

At the time of his death Whitman was more respected in Europe than in his own country. It was not as a poet, indeed, but as a symbol of American democracy that he first won recognition. In the late 19th century his poems exercised a strong fascination on English readers who found his championing of the common man idealistic and prophetic.
Whitman's aim was to transcend traditional epics, to eschew normal aesthetic form, and yet by reflecting American society to enable the poet and his readers to realize themselves and the nature of their American experience. He has continued to hold the attention of very different generations because he offered the welcome conviction that "the crowning growth of the United States" was to be spiritual and heroic and because he was able to uncompromisingly express his own personality in poetic form. Modern readers can still share his preoccupation with the problem of preserving the individual's integrity amid the pressures of mass civilization. Scholars in the 20th century, however, find his social thought less important than his artistry. T.S. Eliot said, "When Whitman speaks of the lilacs or the mockingbird his theories and beliefs drop away like a needless pretext." Whitman invigorated language; he could be strong yet sentimental; and he possessed scope and inventiveness. He portrayed the relationships of man's body and soul and the universe in a new way, often emancipating poetry from contemporary conventions. He had sufficient universality to be considered one of the greatest American poets.

6. Questions

1. Describe Whitman's vision of patriotism.
2. Whitman has been known as the "First Poet of Democracy." Explain this name.
3. Discuss Whitman's understanding of individuality vs. collectivity in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*.
4. Discuss Whitman's conception of body and soul.
5. How would you describe the identity of the main character in *Leaves of Grass*?

7. Further readings of Walt Whitman

BOOK I. INSCRIPTIONS

- *One's-Self I Sing*
- *As I Ponder'd in Silence*
- *In Cabin'd Ships at Sea*
- *To Foreign Lands*
- *To a Historian*
- *To Thee Old Cause*
- *Eidolons*
- *For Him I Sing*

Paper XVIII. American Literature- II

Unit. 4: Selected Poems- Robert Frost

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

1.2 Biographical Sketch of Robert Frost

1.3 Famous Poems of Robert Frost

1.4 Frost's Style of Writing Poetry

2. Characters in Frost's Poems

3. Themes, Outlines, Motifs and Symbols

3.1 General Themes and Outlines of Frost's works

3.2 Motifs and Symbols

4. Summary and Analysis of the following poems:

4.1 Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening

4.2 The Road Not Taken

4.3 Fire and Ice

4.4 Mending Wall

4.5 After Apple-Picking

4.6 Mowing

4.7 Birches

4.8 Home Burial

4.9The Wood-Pile

4.10 The Gift Outright

5. Frost's Contribution to American Literature

6. Questions

7. Further Readings of Robert Frost

1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives

This Unit provides a biographical sketch of Robert Frost, some of his famous poems and his general style of writing poetry. It is followed by a list of characters in his poems and detailed study of their themes and outlines. The summary and analysis of a few of his famous poems are discussed next. It also includes a discussion about Frost's contribution to American Literature. This unit concludes with a set of questions and a list of further readings of Robert Frost to gain knowledge about the critical aspects of his works.

1.2 Biographical sketch of Robert Frost

Robert Lee Frost was an American poet. He is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech. His work frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes. A popular and often-quoted poet, Frost was honored frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry.

Early years - Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, to journalist William Prescott Frost, Jr., and Isabelle Moodie. His mother was of Scottish descent, and his father descended from Nicholas Frost of Tiverton, Devon, England, who had sailed to New Hampshire in 1634 on the Wolfrana.

Frost's father was a teacher and later an editor of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin (which afterwards merged into the San Francisco Examiner), and an unsuccessful candidate for city tax collector. After his father's death in May 5, 1885, in due time the family moved across the country to Lawrence, Massachusetts under the patronage of (Robert's grandfather) William Frost, Sr., who was an overseer at a New England mill. Frost graduated from Lawrence High School in 1892. Frost's mother joined the Swedenborgian church and had him baptized in it, but he left it as an adult.

Despite his later association with rural life, Frost grew up in the city, and published his first poem in his high school's magazine. He attended Dartmouth College long enough to be accepted into the Theta Delta Chi fraternity. Frost returned home to teach and to work at various jobs including delivering newspapers and factory labor. He did not enjoy these jobs at all, feeling his true calling as a poet.

Adult years - In 1894 he sold his first poem, *My Butterfly: An Elegy* (published in the November 8, 1894 edition of the New York Independent) for fifteen dollars. Proud of this accomplishment he proposed marriage to Elinor Miriam White, but she demurred, wanting to finish college (at St. Lawrence University) before they married. Frost then went on an excursion to the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia, and asked Elinor again upon his return. Having graduated she agreed, and they were married at Harvard University, where he attended liberal arts studies for two years.

He did well at Harvard, but left to support his growing family. Grandfather Frost had, shortly before his death, purchased a farm for the young couple in Derry, New Hampshire; and Robert worked the farm for nine years, while writing early in the mornings and producing many of the

poems that would later become famous. Ultimately his farming proved unsuccessful and he returned to education as an English teacher, at Pinkerton Academy from 1906 to 1911, then at the New Hampshire Normal School (now Plymouth State University) in Plymouth, New Hampshire. In 1912 Frost sailed with his family to Great Britain, living first in Glasgow before settling in Beaconsfield outside London. His first book of poetry, A Boy's Will, was published the next year. In England he made some important acquaintances, including Edward Thomas (a member of the group known as the Dymock Poets), T.E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound. Pound would become the first American to write a (favorable) review of Frost's work. Surrounded by his peers, Frost wrote some of his best work while in England.

As World War I began, Frost returned to America in 1915. He bought a farm in Franconia, New Hampshire, where he launched a career of writing, teaching, and lecturing. This family homestead served as the Frosts' summer home until 1938, and is maintained today as 'The Frost Place', a museum and poetry conference site at Franconia. During the years 1916–20, 1923–24, and 1927–1938, Frost taught English at Amherst College, Massachusetts, notably encouraging his students to account for the sounds of the human voice in their writing.

For forty-two years, from 1921 to 1963, Frost spent almost every summer and fall teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English of Middlebury College, at the mountain campus at Ripton, Vermont. He is credited as a major influence upon the development of the school and its writing programs; the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference gained renown during Frost's tenure there.[citation needed] The college now owns and maintains his former Ripton farmstead as a national historic site near the Bread Loaf campus. In 1921 Frost accepted a fellowship teaching post at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he resided until 1927; while there he was awarded a lifetime appointment at the University as a Fellow in Letters. The Robert Frost Ann Arbor home is now situated at The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Frost returned to Amherst in 1927. In 1940 he bought a 5-acre (2.0 ha) plot in South Miami, Florida, naming it Pencil Pines; he spent his winters there for the rest of his life.

Harvard's 1965 alumni directory indicates Frost received an honorary degree there. He also received honorary degrees from Bates College and from Oxford and Cambridge universities; and he was the first person to receive two honorary degrees from Dartmouth College. During his lifetime the Robert Frost Middle School in Fairfax, Virginia, and the main library of Amherst College were named after him.

Frost was 86 when he spoke and performed a reading of his poetry at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. Some two years later, on January 29, 1963, he died, in Boston, of complications from prostate surgery. He was buried at the Old Bennington Cemetery in Bennington, Vermont. His epitaph reads, "I had a lover's quarrel with the world."

Frost's poems are critiqued in the "Anthology of Modern American Poetry", Oxford University Press, where it is mentioned that behind a sometimes charmingly familiar and rural façade, Frost's poetry frequently presents pessimistic and menacing undertones which often are not recognized nor analyzed.

One of the original collections of Frost materials, to which he himself contributed, is found in the Special Collections department of the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. The collection consists of approximately twelve thousand items, including original manuscript poems and letters, correspondence, and photographs, as well as audio and visual recordings.

1.3 Famous poems of Robert Frost

-The Road Not Taken
-Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
-Fire and Ice
-Nothing Gold Can Stay
-Acquainted with the Night
-A Late Walk
-A Question
-A Soldier
-A Minor Bird
-A Boundless Moment
-A Prayer in Spring
-A Time to Talk
-A Brook In The City
-Asking for Roses

1.4 Frost's Style of Writing Poetry

As a poet, Robert Frost was greatly influenced by the emotions and events of everyday life. Within a seemingly banal event from a normal day—watching the ice weigh down the branches of a birch tree, mending the stones of a wall, mowing a field of hay—Frost discerned a deeper meaning, a metaphysical expression of a larger theme such as love, hate, or conflict.

Frost is perhaps most famous for being a pastoral poet in terms of the subject of everyday life. Many of his most famous poems (such as *Mending Wall* and S*topping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*) are inspired by the natural world, particularly his time spent as a poultry farmer in New Hampshire. Ironically, until his adulthood in New England, Frost was primarily a "city boy" who spent nearly all of his time in an urban environment. It is possibly because of his late introduction to the rural side of New England that Frost became so intrigued by the natural world.

After the publication of his *Collected Poems* in 1930, Frost clarified his interest in the pastoral world as a subject for his poetry, writing: "Poetry is more often of the country than the city…Poetry is very, very rural – rustic. It might be taken as a symbol of man, taking its rise from individuality and seclusion – written first for the person that writes and then going out into its social appeal and use." Yet Frost does not limit himself to expressing the pastoral only in terms of beauty and peace, as in a traditional sense. Instead, he also chooses to emphasize the harsh conflicts of the natural world: the clash between urban and rural lifestyles, the unfettered emotions and struggles inherent in rural life, even the sense of loss and simultaneous growth that accompanies the changing of the seasons.

Frost's poetry is also significant because of the amount of autobiographical material that it contains. Frost was not a happy man; he suffered from serious bouts of depression and anxiety throughout his life and was never convinced that his poetry was truly worthwhile (as evidenced by his obsessive desire to receive a Nobel Prize). He suffered through the untimely deaths of his

father, mother, and sister, as well as four of his six children and his beloved wife, all of which contributed to the melancholic mentality that appears in much of Frost's work.

The raw emotion and sense of loss that pervades Frost's poetry is particularly clear because of his straightforward verse style. Although he worked within some traditional poetic forms (usually iambic meter), he was also flexible and changed the requirements of the form if it conflicted with the expression of a particular line. Yet, even as he was willing to utilize the basic conventions of some poetic forms, Frost refused to sacrifice the clarity of his poetry. With that in mind, he was particularly interested in what he called "the sound of sense," a poetic belief system in which the sound of the poetry (rhythm, rhyme, syllables) is as important to the overall work as the actual words. Therefore, in poems such as *Mowing* and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, Frost's use of particular words and rhythmic structure creates an aural sense of the mood and subject of the piece even as the words outline the narrative.

Frost's use of "the sound of sense" is most successful because of the general clarity and even colloquial nature of his poetry. At one point in his life, he asserted, "All poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech." Although this quotation is perhaps a generalization of Frost's poetic style, it does speak to the accessibility and simplicity that has made Frost's poetry so appealing to so many readers for decades. Because of the clarity of the sounds in his work, both in terms of the narrative and in terms of "the sound of sense," the readers are able to comprehend the basic emotion of a poem almost instantly and then explore the deeper, more metaphysical meanings behind each simple line.

During his beginnings as a poet, Frost was often criticized for using such a colloquial tone in his poetry. When his first poem was published in *The Independent* in 1894, the acceptance was accompanied by a copy of Lanier's "Science of English Verse," a not so subtle suggestion that Frost needed to work on mastering a more traditional tone and meter. Even after his success as a poetic was assured, Frost was still censured by some for writing seemingly simplistic poetry, works that were not reminiscent of high art.

Yet even though Frost's poetry is simple and clear, Richard Wilbur points out that it is not written in the colloquial language of an uneducated farm boy, but rather in "a beautifully refined and charged colloquial language." In other words, Frost's ability to express such a depth of feeling in each of his poems through the medium of colloquial speech reveals a far greater grasp of the human language than many of his critics would admit. It is because of the clarity of his poetry that his poems are beloved and studied in high schools throughout the United States, and it is also because of this clarity that Frost is able to explore topics of emotion, struggle, and conflict that would be incomprehensible in any other form.

2. Characters in Frost's Poetry

2.1 Narrator

The majority of Frost's poems are written in the first-person form with a common narrator. Although the narrator in each of these poems is not necessarily the same, there are always aspects that relate to Frost's own voice. Many of the poems have autobiographical elements (for example: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Acquainted with the Night, Mending Wall,* and *The Lockless Door*), which automatically create a sense of Frost's personality. The common themes of

depression, isolation, and melancholy, relating directly to Frost's personal struggles with depression and loneliness, also reveal Frost as the primary inspiration for the "narrator."

At times, however, Frost clearly detaches himself from the character of the "narrator" as a way to provide ironic commentary on the overall meaning of the poem. For example, in *The Road Not Taken*, the first three stanzas can be seen as directly linked to Frost's own voice, but the final stanza (in which Frost ironically mocks the narrator's sudden nostalgia for the past) has Frost swiftly pulling out of the poem's character in order to highlight his hypocrisy to the reader.

2.2 The Neighbor (*Mending Wall*)

At first, the neighbor is presented as a throw-back to earlier times, clinging to the old-fashioned habit of maintaining the property line simply for the sake of tradition. Whenever the narrator asks him to justify his habit, the neighbor says only: "Good fences make good neighbors." Over the course of the poem, it becomes clear that the neighbor is not an unreasonable traditionalist, but is actually wise in his repeated adage and is an inspiration to the narrator.

2.3 Mary (*The Death of the Hired Man*)

Mary, Warren's wife, is presented in a more compassionate light than Warren in terms of her treatment of Silas. She believes that people should help those in need, whether they deserve it or not. Although she understands that Silas did not fulfill his obligation to the farm, Mary still wants to help him and suspects that he returned to the farm to die. She convinces Warren to let Silas stay.

2.4 Warren (*The Death of the Hired Man*)

Warren, Mary's husband, is presented as more rational and realistic than Mary. He gave Silas several chances to prove himself as a farmhand, but each time was disappointed by Silas' unreliability. When Silas returns to the farm, Warren does not feel that he has any obligation to the former farmhand because Silas did not uphold his end of the bargain. At Mary's urging, Warren eventually agrees to let Silas stay on the farm.

2.5 Silas (*The Death of the Hired Man*)

Silas is an unreliable farmhand who has worked for Mary and Warren several times in the past. After a long period of absence, Silas returns to the farm and asks Mary and Warren to let him work for them again. In actuality, Silas is returning to the farm to die. Although it is suggested that he has a wealthy brother, Frost makes it clear that Silas prefers to have his last moments with Mary and Warren because of their kindness and compassion. Because Silas dies by the last line of the poem, it seems likely that he knew that he would be too sick to work at the farm. Yet, out of pride (or perhaps embarrassment), Silas does not beg Warren and Mary for a place to die, but instead suggests the more honorable bargain of a room in exchange for work.

2.6 Harold Wilson (*The Death of the Hired Man*)

A former farmhand for Warren and Mary, Harold worked with Silas on the hay harvest four years before and was immediately at odds with him because of his interest in education. Although Harold studied Latin and music and ultimately went to college, Silas maintained that all of his education was worthless because Harold could not find water with a hazel prong.

2.7 The Wife/Mother ("Home Burial")

After the death of her child, the wife is inconsolable and blames her husband for seeming to be apathetic about their loss. She is particularly resentful of him for not understanding why she cannot yet move on with her life. Although her husband begs her to stay and communicate with him, the wife is unable to see past her grief to salvage the relationship.

2.8 The Husband/Father (*Home Burial*)

At the beginning of the poem, the husband seems to be largely apathetic about the death of his child, but it soon becomes clear that he simply expresses his grief in a different way. While his wife mourns outwardly, gazing endlessly at the child's grave, the husband uses physical labor (specifically, the act of digging a grave) as a way to mourn. The husband has a difficult time communicating with his wife, but he does attempt to make an effort to save their marriage by empathizing with her.

2.9 The Old Man (*An Old Man's Winter Night*)

In this poem, the old man is a representation of complete isolation. Lacking the memory to recall former happiness, he has no past or future and does not even remember why he is in this house during the winter. However, despite his lack of identity, the old man clings tenaciously to his identity in terms of his existence in the house. He is alone, but he is nevertheless unwilling to give up his claim on the present and thus becomes a model of courage and the human spirit.

2.10 The Boy (*Out, Out*--)

Frost characterizes the boy as a young man who is forced to do a man's work, even though he is a child at heart. It is because of his childish excitement over supper that the boy accidentally cuts his hand with the buzz saw and eventually bleeds to death. Even though he is mature enough to realize that his hand must be amputated, the boy still hopes to be intact as he dies. Frost presents the conflict between the boy's childhood and his adult responsibilities in terms of World War I and the fields of Europe where many young boys were already losing their innocence, limbs, and lives.

2.11 The Sister (*Out, Out*--)

When the sister calls the men in for supper at the end of the day, the boy is so distracted that he cuts his hand with the buzz saw. The boy urges his sister not to let the doctor amputate his hand, but, as the boy knows, the sister is powerless. The character of the sister is particularly significant as a feminine foil to the boy, a child who is forced to do the work of an adult before his time.

2.12 The Doctor (*Out, Out*--)

The doctor treats the boy after he cuts his hand with the buzz saw. Despite the boy's protestations, the doctor has to amputate the boy's hand. After he places him under anesthesia, the boy dies.

3. Themes, Outlines, Motifs and Symbols

3.1 General Themes and Outlines of Frost’s works

3.1.1 Nature

Frost places a great deal of importance on Nature in all of his collections. Because of the time he spent in New England, the majority of pastoral scenes that he describes are inspired by specific locations in New England. However, Frost does not limit himself to stereotypical pastoral themes

such as sheep and shepherds. Instead, he focuses on the dramatic struggles that occur within the natural world, such as the conflict of the changing of seasons (as in *After Apple-Picking*) and the destructive side of nature (as in *Once by the Pacific*). Frost also presents the natural world as one that inspires deep metaphysical thought in the individuals who are exposed to it (as in *Birches* and *The Sound of Trees*). For Frost, Nature is not simply a background for poetry, but rather a central character in his works.

3.1.2 Communication

Communication or the lack thereof, appears as a significant theme is several of Frost's poems, as Frost presents it as the only possible escape from isolation and despair. Unfortunately, Frost also makes it clear that communication is extremely difficult to achieve. For example, in "Home Burial," Frost describes two terrible events: the death of a child and the destruction of a marriage. The death of the child is tragic, but inability of the husband and wife to communicate with each other and express their grief about the loss is what ultimately destroys the marriage. Frost highlights this inability to communicate by writing the poem in free verse dialogue; each character speaks clearly to the reader, but neither is able to understand the other. Frost explores a similar theme in *Acquainted with the Night*, in which the narrator is unable to pull himself out of his depression because he cannot bring himself even to make eye contact with those around him. In each of these cases, the reader is left with the knowledge that communication could have saved the characters from their isolation. Yet, because of an unwillingness to take the steps necessary to create a relationship with another person, the characters are doomed.

3.1.3 Everyday Life

Frost is very interested in the activities of everyday life, because it is this side of humanity that is the most "real" to him. Even the most basic act in a normal day can have numerous hidden meanings that need only to be explored by a poetic mind. For example, in the poem *Mowing*, the simple act of mowing hay with a scythe is transformed into a discussion of the value of hard work and the traditions of the New England countryside. As Frost argues in the poem, by focusing on "reality," the real actions of real people, a poet can sift through the unnecessary elements of fantasy and discover "Truth." Moreover, Frost believes that the emphasis on everyday life allows him to communicate with his readers more clearly; they can empathize with the struggles and emotions that are expressed in his poems and come to a greater understanding of "Truth" themselves.

3.1.4 Isolation of the Individual

This theme is closely related to the theme of communication. The majority of the characters in Frost's poems are isolated in one way or another. Even the characters that show no sign of depression or loneliness, such as the narrators in *The Sound of Trees* or *Fire and Ice*, are still presented as detached from the rest of society, isolated because of their unique perspective. In some cases, the isolation is a far more destructive force. For example, in *The Lockless Door*, the narrator has remained in a "cage" of isolation for so many years that he is too terrified to answer the door when he hears a knock. This heightened isolation keeps the character from fulfilling his potential as an individual and ultimately makes him a prisoner of his own making. Yet, as Frost suggests, this isolation can be avoided by interactions with other members of society; if the character in *The Lockless Door* could have brought himself to open the door and face an invasion of his isolation, he could have achieved a greater level of personal happiness.

3.1.5 Duty

Duty is a very important value in the rural communities of New England, so it is not surprising that Frost employs it as one of the primary themes of his poetry. Frost describes conflicts between desire and duty as if the two must always be mutually exclusive; in order to support his family, a farmer must acknowledge his responsibilities rather than indulge in his personal desires. This conflict is particularly clear in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, when the narrator expresses his wish to stay in the woods and watch the snow continue to fall. However, he is unable to deny his obligation to his family and his community; he cannot remain in the woods because of his "promises to keep," and so he continues on his way. Similarly, in *The Sound of Tree*, Frost describes a character who wants to follow the advice of the trees and make the "reckless" decision to leave his community. At the end of the poem, the character does not choose to leave (yet) because his sense of duty to those around him serves as the roots that keep him firmly grounded.

3.1.6 Rationality versus Imagination

This theme is similar to the theme of duty, in that the hardworking people whom Frost describes in his poetry are forced to choose between rationality and imagination; the two cannot exist simultaneously. The adults in Frost's poetry generally maintain their rationality as a burden of duty, but there are certain cases when the hint of imagination is almost too seductive to bear. For example, in *Birches*, the narrator wishes that he could climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood and leave the rational world behind, if only for a moment. This ability to escape rationality and indulge in the liberation of imagination is limited to the years of childhood. After reaching adulthood, the traditions of New England life require strict rationality and an acceptance of responsibility. As a result of this conflict, Frost makes the poem *Out, Out--* even more tragic, describing a young boy who is forced to leave his childhood behind to work at a man's job and ultimately dies in the process.

3.1.7 Rural Life versus Urban Life

This theme relates to Frost's interest in Nature and everyday life. Frost's experience growing up in New England exposed him to a particular way of life that seemed less complicated and yet more meaningful than the life of a city dweller. The farmers whom Frost describes in his poetry have a unique perspective on the world as well as a certain sense of honor and duty in terms of their work and their community. Frost is not averse to examining urban life in his poetry; in *Acquainted with the Night*, the narrator is described as being someone who lives in a large city. However, Frost has more opportunities to find metaphysical meaning in everyday tasks and explore the relationship between mankind and nature through the glimpses of rural life and farming communities that he expresses in his poetry. Urban life is "real," but it lacks the quality and clarity of life that is so fascinating to Frost in his work.

3.2 Motifs and Symbols

3.2.1 Motifs

3.2.1.1 Manual Labor

Labor functions as a tool for self-analysis and discovery in Frost's poetry. Work allows his speakers to understand themselves and the world around them. Traditionally, pastoral and romantic poets emphasized a passive relationship with nature, wherein people would achieve understanding and knowledge by observing and meditating, not by directly interacting with the natural world. In contrast, Frost's speakers work, labor, and act—mending fences, as in *Mending Wall;* harvesting fruit, as in *After Apple-Picking*; or cutting hay, as in *Mowing* (1915). Even children work, although the hard labor of the little boy in *Out, Out—* (1920) leads to his death. The boy's death implies that while work was necessary for adults, children should be exempted from difficult labor until they have attained the required maturity with which to handle both the physical and the mental stress that goes along with rural life. Frost implies that a connection with the earth and with one's self can only be achieved by actively communing with the natural world through work.

3.2.1.2 New England

Long considered the quintessential regional poet, Frost uses New England as a recurring setting throughout his work. Although he spent his early life in California, Frost moved to the East Coast in his early teens and spent the majority of his adult life in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The region's landscape, history, culture, and attitudes fill his poetry, and he emphasizes local color and natural elements of the forests, orchards, fields, and small towns. His speakers wander through dense woods and snowstorms, pick apples, and climb mountains. *North of Boston*, the title of Frost's second collection of poetry, firmly established him as the chronicler of small-town, rural life in New England. Frost found inspiration in his day-to-day experiences, basing *Mending Wall*, for instance, on a fence near his farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and *The Oven Bird* (1920) on birds indigenous to the nearby woods.

3.2.1.3 The Sound of Sense

Frost coined the phrase the*sound of sense* to emphasize the poetic diction, or word choice, used throughout his work. According to letters he wrote in 1913 and 1914, the sound of sense should be positive, as well as proactive, and should resemble everyday speech. To achieve the sound of sense, Frost chose words for tone and sound, in addition to considering each word's meaning. Many poems replicate content through rhyme, meter, and alliteration. For instance, *Mowing* captures the back-and-forth sound of a scythe swinging, while *Out, Out—* imitates the jerky, noisy roar of a buzz saw. Believing that poetry should be recited, rather than read, Frost not only paid attention to the sound of his poems but also went on speaking tours throughout the United States, where he would read, comment, and discuss his work. Storytelling has a long history in the United States, particularly in New England, and Frost wanted to tap into this history to emphasize poetry as an oral art.

3.2.2 *Symbols*

3.2.2.1 Trees

Trees delineate borders in Frost's poetry. They not only mark boundaries on earth, such as that between a pasture and a forest, but also boundaries between earth and heaven. In some poems, such as *After Apple-Picking* and *Birches*, trees are the link between earth, or humanity, and the sky, or the divine. Trees function as boundary spaces, where moments of connection or revelation become possible. Humans can observe and think critically about humanity and the divine under the shade of these trees or standing nearby, inside the trees' boundary space. Forests and edges of forests function similarly as boundary spaces, as in *Into My Own* (1915) or *Desert Places*. Finally, trees acts as boundaries or borders between different areas or types of experiences. When Frost's speakers and subjects are near the edge of a forest, wandering in a forest, or climbing a tree, they exist in liminal spaces, halfway between the earth and the sky, which allow the speakers to engage with nature and experience moments of revelation.

3.2.2.2 Birds and Birdsong

In Frost's poetry, birds represent nature, and their songs represent nature's attitudes toward humanity. Birds provide a voice for the natural world to communicate with humans. But their songs communicate only nature's indifference toward the human world, as in *The Need of* Being *Versed in Country Things* (1923) and *Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same* (1942). Their beautiful melodies belie an absence of feeling for humanity and our situations. Nevertheless, as a part of nature, birds have a right to their song, even if it annoys or distresses human listeners. In *A Minor Bird* (1928), the speaker eventually realizes that all songs must continue to exist, whether those songs are found in nature, as with birds, or in culture, as with poems. Frost also uses birds and birdsong to symbolize poetry, and birds become a medium through which to comment on the efficacy of poetry as a tool of emotional expression, as in *The Oven Bird* (1920).

3.2.2.3 Solitary Travelers

Solitary travelers appear frequently in Frost's poems, and their attitudes toward their journeys and their surroundings highlight poetic and historical themes, including the figure of the wanderer and the changing social landscape of New England in the twentieth century. As in romanticism, a literary movement active in England from roughly 1750 to 1830, Frost's poetry demonstrates great respect for the social outcast, or wanderer, who exists on the fringes of a community. Like the romanticized notion of the solitary traveler, the poet was also separated from the community, which allowed him to view social interactions, as well as the natural world, with a sense of wonder, fear, and admiration. Able to engage with his surroundings using fresh eyes, the solitary traveler simultaneously exists as a part of the landscape and as an observer of the landscape. Found in *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1923), *Into My Own*, *Acquainted with the Night*, and *The Road Not Taken* (1920), among other poems, the solitary traveler demonstrates the historical and regional context of Frost's poetry. In the early twentieth century, the development of transportation and industry created the social type of the wandering "tramp," who lived a transient lifestyle, looking for work in a rapidly developing industrial society. Like Frost's

speakers and subjects, these people lived on the outskirts of the community, largely away from the warmth and complexity of human interaction.

4. Summary and Analysis of the following poems:

4.1 *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1923)

On a dark winter evening, the narrator stops his sleigh to watch the snow falling in the woods. At first he worries that the owner of the property will be upset by his presence, but then he remembers that the owner lives in town, and he is free to enjoy the beauty of the falling snow. The sleigh horse is confused by his master's behavior — stopping far away from any farmhouse — and shakes his harness bells in impatience. After a few more moments, the narrator reluctantly continues on his way.

Analysis

In terms of text, this poem is remarkably simple: in sixteen lines, there is not a single three-syllable word and only sixteen two-syllable words. In terms of rhythmic scheme and form, however, the poem is surprisingly complex. The poem is made up of four stanzas, each with four stressed syllables in iambic meter. Within an individual stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme (for example, "know," "though," and "snow" of the first stanza), while the third line rhymes with the first, second, and fourth lines of the following stanza (for example, "here" of the first stanza rhymes with "queer," "near," and "year" of the second stanza).

One of Frost's most famous works, this poem is often touted as an example of his life work. As such, the poem is often analyzed to the minutest detail, far beyond what Frost himself intended for the short and simple piece. In reference to analyses of the work, Frost once said that he was annoyed by those "pressing it for more than it should be pressed for. It means enough without its being pressed…I don't say that somebody shouldn't press it, but I don't want to be there."

The poem was inspired by a particularly difficult winter in New Hampshire when Frost was returning home after an unsuccessful trip at the market. Realizing that he did not have enough to buy Christmas presents for his children, Frost was overwhelmed with depression and stopped his horse at a bend in the road in order to cry. After a few minutes, the horse shook the bells on its harness, and Frost was cheered enough to continue home.

The narrator in the poem does not seem to suffer from the same financial and emotional burdens as Frost did, but there is still an overwhelming sense of the narrator's unavoidable responsibilities. He would prefer to watch the snow falling in the woods, even with his horse's impatience, but he has "promises to keep," obligations that he cannot ignore even if he wants to. It is unclear what these specific obligations are, but Frost does suggest that the narrator is particularly attracted to the woods because there is "not a farmhouse near." He is able to enjoy complete isolation.

Frost's decision to repeat the final line could be read in several ways. On one hand, it reiterates the idea that the narrator has responsibilities that he is reluctant to fulfill. The repetition serves as a reminder, even a mantra, to the narrator, as if he would ultimately decide to stay in the woods unless he forces himself to remember his responsibilities. On the other hand, the repeated line could be a signal that the narrator is slowly falling asleep. Within this interpretation, the poem

could end with the narrator's death, perhaps as a result of hypothermia from staying in the frozen woods for too long.

The narrator's "promises to keep" can also be seen as a reference to traditional American duties for a farmer in New England. In a time and a place where hard work is valued above all things, the act of watching snow fall in the woods may be viewed as a particularly trivial indulgence. Even the narrator is aware that his behavior is not appropriate: he projects his insecurities onto his horse by admitting that even a work animal would "think it queer."

Form

The poem consists of four (almost) identically constructed stanzas. Each line is iambic, with four stressed syllables:

Within the four lines of each stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme. The third line does not, but it sets up the rhymes for the next stanza. For example, in the third stanza, *queer*, *near*, and *year* all rhyme, but *lake* rhymes with*shake*, *mistake*, and *flake* in the following stanza.

The notable exception to this pattern comes in the final stanza, where the third line rhymes with the previous two and is repeated as the fourth line.

One should not be decieved by the simple words and the easiness of the rhymes; this is a very difficult form to achieve in English without debilitating a poem's content with forced rhymes.

4.2 *The Road Not Taken* (1916)

The narrator comes upon a fork in the road while walking through a yellow wood. He considers both paths and concludes that each one is equally well-traveled and appealing. After choosing one of the roads, the narrator tells himself that he will come back to this fork one day in order to try the other road. However, he realizes that it is unlikely that he will ever have the opportunity to come back to this specific point in time because his choice of path will simply lead to other forks in the road (and other decisions). The narrator ends on a nostalgic note, wondering how different things would have been had he chosen the other path.

Analysis

This poem is made up of four stanzas of five lines, each with a rhyme scheme of ABAAB.

Along with *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, this poem is one of Frost's most beloved works and is frequently studied in high school literature classes. Since its publication, many readers have analyzed the poem as a nostalgic commentary on life choices. The narrator decided to seize the day and express himself as an individual by choosing the road that was "less traveled by." As a result of this decision, the narrator claims, his life was fundamentally different that it would have been had he chosen the more well-traveled path.

This reading of the poem is extremely popular because every reader can empathize with the narrator's decision: having to choose between two paths without having any knowledge of where each road will lead. Moreover, the narrator's decision to choose the "less traveled" path

demonstrates his courage. Rather than taking the safe path that others have traveled, the narrator prefers to make his own way in the world.

However, when we look closer at the text of the poem, it becomes clear that such an idealistic analysis is largely inaccurate. The narrator only distinguishes the paths from one another after he has already selected one and traveled many years through life. When he first comes upon the fork in the road, the paths are described as being fundamentally identical. In terms of beauty, both paths are equally "fair," and the overall "…passing there / Had worn them really about the same."

It is only as an old man that the narrator looks back on his life and decides to place such importance on this particular decision in his life. During the first three stanzas, the narrator shows no sense of remorse for his decision nor any acknowledgement that such a decision might be important to his life. Yet, as an old man, the narrator attempts to give a sense of order to his past and perhaps explain why certain things happened to him. Of course, the excuse that he took the road "less traveled by" is false, but the narrator still clings to this decision as a defining moment of his life, not only because of the path that he chose but because he had to make a choice in the first place.

Form

The Road Not Taken consists of four stanzas of five lines. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB; the rhymes are strict and masculine, with the notable exception of the last line (we do not usually stress the *-ence*of *difference*). There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

4.3 *Fire and Ice* (1923)

This short poem outlines the familiar question about the fate of the world, wondering if it is more likely to be destroyed by fire or ice. People are on both sides of the debate, and Frost introduces the narrator to provide his personal take on the question of the end of the world. The narrator first concludes that the world must end in fire after considering his personal experience with desire and passion, the emotions of fire. Yet, after considering his experience with "ice," or hatred, the narrator acknowledges that ice would be equally destructive.

Analysis

Only nine lines long, this little poem is a brilliant example of Frost's concisely ironic literary style. The poem varies between two meter lengths (either eight syllables or four syllables) and uses three sets of interwoven rhymes, based on "-ire," "-ice," and "-ate."

In the first two lines of the poem, Frost creates a clear dichotomy between fire and ice and the two groups of people that believe in each element. By using the term "some" instead of "I" or "an individual," Frost asserts that the distinction between the two elements is a universal truth, not just an idea promoted by an individual. In addition to the unavoidable contradiction between fire and ice, these first lines also outline the claim that the world will end as a direct result of one of these elements. It is unclear which element will destroy the world, but it is significant to note that fire and ice are the only options. The poem does not allow for any other possibilities in terms of the world's fate, just as there are not any other opinions allowed in the black-and-white debate between fire and ice.

Interestingly, the two possibilities for the world's destruction correspond directly to a common scientific debate during the time Frost wrote the poem. Some scientists believed that the world would be incinerated from its fiery core, while others were convinced that a coming ice age would destroy all living things on the earth's surface. Instead of maintaining a strictly scientific perspective on this debate, Frost introduces a more emotional side, associating passionate desire with fire and hatred with ice. Within this metaphorical view of the two elements, the "world" can be recognized as a metaphor for a relationship. Too much fire and passion can quickly consume a relationship, while cold indifference and hate can be equally destructive.

Although the first two lines of the poem insist that there can only be a single choice between fire and ice, the narrator undercuts this requirement by acknowledging that both elements could successfully destroy the world. Moreover, the fact that he has had personal experience with both (in the form of desire and hate) reveals that fire and ice are not mutually exclusive, as the first two lines of the poem insist. In fact, though the narrator first concludes that the world will end in fire, he ultimately admits that the world could just as easily end in ice; fire and ice, it seems, are strikingly similar.

Form

Fire and Ice follows an invented form, irregularly interweaving three rhymes and two line lengths into a poem of nine lines. Each line ends either with an *-ire*, *-ice*, or *-ate*rhyme. Each line contains either four or eight syllables. Each line can be read naturally as iambic, although this is not strictly necessary for several lines. Frost employs strong enjambment in line 7to great effect.

4.4 *Mending Wall* (1914)

Every year, two neighbors meet to repair the stone wall that divides their property. The narrator is skeptical of this tradition, unable to understand the need for a wall when there is no livestock to be contained on the property, only apples and pine trees. He does not believe that a wall should exist simply for the sake of existing. Moreover, he cannot help but notice that the natural world seems to dislike the wall as much as he does: mysterious gaps appear, boulders fall for no reason. The neighbor, on the other hand, asserts that the wall is crucial to maintaining their relationship, asserting, "Good fences make good neighbors." Over the course of the mending, the narrator attempts to convince his neighbor otherwise and accuses him of being old-fashioned for maintaining the tradition so strictly. No matter what the narrator says, though, the neighbor stands his ground, repeating only: "Good fences make good neighbors."

Analysis

This poem is the first work in Frost's second book of poetry, "North of Boston," which was published upon his return from England in 1915. While living in England with his family, Frost was exceptionally homesick for the farm in New Hampshire where he had lived with his wife from 1900 to 1909. Despite the eventual failure of the farm, Frost associated his time in New Hampshire with a peaceful, rural sensibility that he instilled in the majority of his subsequent poems. "Mending Wall" is autobiographical on an even more specific level: a French-Canadian named Napoleon Guay had been Frost's neighbor in New Hampshire, and the two had often walked along their property line and repaired the wall that separated their land. Ironically, the most famous line of the poem ("Good fences make good neighbors") was not invented by Frost

himself, but was rather a phrase that Guay frequently declared to Frost during their walks. This particular adage was a popular colonial proverb in the middle of the 17th century, but variations of it also appeared in Norway ("There must be a fence between good neighbors"), Germany ("Between neighbor's gardens a fence is good"), Japan ("Build a fence even between intimate friends"), and even India ("Love your neighbor, but do not throw down the dividing wall").

In terms of form, "Mending Wall" is not structured with stanzas; it is a simple forty-five lines of first-person narrative. Frost does maintain iambic stresses, but he is flexible with the form in order to maintain the conversational feel of the poem. He also shies away from any obvious rhyme patterns and instead relies upon the occasional internal rhyme and the use of assonance in certain ending terms (such as "wall," "hill," "balls," "well").

In the poem itself, Frost creates two distinct characters who have different ideas about what exactly makes a person a good neighbor. The narrator deplores his neighbor's preoccupation with repairing the wall; he views it as old-fashioned and even archaic. After all, he quips, his apples are not going to invade the property of his neighbor's pinecones. Moreover, within a land of such of such freedom and discovery, the narrator asks, are such borders necessary to maintain relationships between people? Despite the narrator's skeptical view of the wall, the neighbor maintains his seemingly "old-fashioned" mentality, responding to each of the narrator's disgruntled questions and rationalizations with nothing more than the adage: "Good fences make good neighbors."

As the narrator points out, the very act of mending the wall seems to be in opposition to nature. Every year, stones are dislodged and gaps suddenly appear, all without explanation. Every year, the two neighbors fill the gaps and replace the fallen boulders, only to have parts of the wall fall over again in the coming months. It seems as if nature is attempting to destroy the barriers that man has created on the land, even as man continues to repair the barriers, simply out of habit and tradition.

Ironically, while the narrator seems to begrudge the annual repairing of the wall, Frost subtley points out that the narrator is actually more active than the neighbor. It is the narrator who selects the day for mending and informs his neighbor across the property. Moreover, the narrator himself walks along the wall at other points during the year in order to repair the damage that has been done by local hunters. Despite his skeptical attitude, it seems that the narrator is even more tied to the tradition of wall-mending than his neighbor. Perhaps his skeptical questions and quips can then be read as an attempt to justify his own behavior to himself. While he chooses to present himself as a modern man, far beyond old-fashioned traditions, the narrator is really no different from his neighbor: he too clings to the concept of property and division, of ownership and individuality.

Ultimately, the presence of the wall between the properties does ensure a quality relationship between the two neighbors. By maintaining the division between the properties, the narrator and his neighbor are able to maintain their individuality and personal identity as farmers: one of apple trees, and one of pine trees. Moreover, the annual act of mending the wall also provides an opportunity for the two men to interact and communicate with each other, an event that might not otherwise occur in an isolated rural environment. The act of meeting to repair the wall allows the

two men to develop their relationship and the overall community far more than if each maintained their isolation on separate properties.

Form

Blank verse is the baseline meter of this poem, but few of the lines march along in blank verse's characteristic lock-step iambs, five abreast. Frost maintains five stressed syllables per line, but he varies the feet extensively to sustain the natural speech-like quality of the verse. There are no stanza breaks, obvious end-rhymes, or rhyming patterns, but many of the end-words share an assonance
(e.g., *wall, hill, balls, wall,* and *well sun, thing, stone, mean, line,* and *again* or *game,them,* and *hi m* twice). Internal rhymes, too, are subtle, slanted, and conceivably coincidental. The vocabulary is all of a piece—no fancy words, all short (only one word, *another,* is of three syllables), all conversational—and this is perhaps why the words resonate so consummately with each other in sound and feel.

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4.5 *After Apple-Picking* (1914)

At the end of a long day of apple picking, the narrator is tired and thinks about his day. He has felt sleepy and even trance-like since the early morning, when he looked at the apple trees through a thin sheet of ice that he lifted from the drinking trough. He feels himself beginning to dream but cannot escape the thought of his apples even in sleep: he sees visions of apples growing from blossoms, falling off trees, and piling up in the cellar. As he gives himself over to sleep, he wonders if it is the normal sleep of a tired man or the deep winter sleep of death.

Analysis

In terms of form, this poem is bizarre because it weaves in and out of traditional structure. Approximately twenty-five of the forty-two lines are written in standard iambic pentameter, and there are twenty end-rhymes throughout the poem. This wandering structure allows Frost to emphasize the sense of moving between a waking and dream-like state, just as the narrator does. The repetition of the term "sleep," even after its paired rhyme ("heap") has long been forgotten, also highlights the narrator's gradual descent into dreaming.

In some respects, this poem is simply about apple picking. After a hard day of work, the apple farmer completely fatigued but is still unable to escape the mental act of picking apples: he still

sees the apples in front of him, still feels the ache in his foot as if he is standing on a ladder, still bemoans the fate of the flawless apples that fall to the ground and must be consigned to the cider press.

Yet, as in all of Frost's poems, the narrator's everyday act of picking apples also speaks to a more metaphorical discussion of seasonal changes and death. Although the narrator does not say when the poem takes place, it is clear that winter is nearly upon him: the grass is "hoary," the surface of the water in the trough is frozen enough to be used as a pane of glass, and there is an overall sense of the "essence" of winter. Death is coming, but the narrator does not know if the death will be renewed by spring in a few months or if everything will stay buried under mindless snow for all eternity.

Because of the varying rhymes and tenses of the poem, it is not clear when the narrator is dreaming or awake. One possibility is that the entirety of the poem takes place within a dream. The narrator is already asleep and is automatically reliving the day's harvest as he dreams. This explanation clarifies the disjointed narrative — shifting from topic to topic as the narrator dreams — as well as the narrator's assertion that he was "well upon my way to sleep" before the sheet of ice fell from his hands.

Another explanation is that the narrator is dying, and his rambling musings on apple picking are the fevered hallucinations of a man about to leave the world of the living. With that in mind, the narrator's declaration that he is "done with apple-picking now" has more finality, almost as if his vision of the apple harvest is a farewell. Even so, he can be satisfied in his work because, with the exception of a few apples on the tree, he fulfilled all of his obligations to the season and to himself. Significantly, even as he falls into a complete sleep, the narrator is unable to discern if he is dying or merely sleeping; the two are merged completely in the essence of the oncoming winter, and Frost refuses to tell the reader what actually happens.

Form

This is a rhyming poem that follows no preordained rhyme scheme. *After Apple-Picking* is basically iambic, and mostly in pentameter, but line-length variants abound. Line 1, for example, is long by any standard. Line 32 is very short: one foot. The poem's shorter lines of di-, tri-, and tetrameter serve to syncopate and sharpen the steady, potentially droning rhythm of pentameter. They keep the reader on her toes, awake, while the speaker drifts off into oblivion.

4.6 *Mowing* (1913)

As the narrator works in the field on a hot day, he notices that his scythe seems to be whispering as it works. The narrator is unable to hear what the scythe is saying, and he admits the possibility that the whispering sound is simply his imagination or even the result of heatstroke. He eventually concludes that the scythe is expressing its own beliefs about the world. Instead of dreaming about inactivity or reward for its labor as a person would, the scythe takes its sole pleasure from its hard work. It receives satisfaction from "the fact" of its earnest labor in the field, not from transient dreams or irrational hopes. As the poem ends, the narrator ceases his own unimportant musings and follows the scythe's example: seizing on the pleasure of hard work and making hay.

Analysis

In terms of rhyme scheme, “Mowing” does not follow the traditional form of the sonnet, though it does include the standard fourteen lines. Instead of using the strict Petrarchan rhyme scheme (ABBAABBA CDECDE) or the Shakespearean rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG), Frost creates an amalgamation of both: ABC ABD ECD FEG FG.

This poem is one of the first in which Frost utilizes his “sound of sense” technique. Within this technique, the poet employs specific sounds and syllables in order to construct an aural feeling of the subject and narrative intention. In this case, both the repeated use of the term “whisper” and the swaying motion of the meter in certain lines (such as “Perhaps it was something…/ Something perhaps) provide a visceral sense of the scythe moving back and forth as it cuts the hay in the field.

The fact that Frost uses the word “whisper” is significant because it personifies the scythe, transforming it into a companion and working colleague for the narrator rather than an inanimate farming tool. With that in mind, the scythe and its philosophical view on work could actually be seen as a reflection of the narrator’s own beliefs, or rather a belief that the farmer hopes to have as he continues to work on his farm. The circular nature of the poem supports this claim: by the end of the poem, the narrator has stopped attempting to analyze the scythe’s whispering within his imagination and has resorted to simple, honest work.

This mentality can be expanded as Frost’s justification of his own poetic sensibility. Frost was well known (and often criticized) for writing poetry about everyday life on the farms of New England - a topic that did not always seem appropriate for the high art of poetry. Yet, as Frost points out in “Mowing,” truth and fact are far more significant than imaginative fancies of gold and elves. In other words, his emphasis on reality — the lives and struggles of real people — makes his poetry sweeter and more effective than any traditional sonnet that narrates fairytale lands.

Form

This is a sonnet with a peculiar rhyme scheme: ABC ABD ECD GEH GH. In terms of rhyme, *Mowing* does not fit into either a strict Shakespearean or Petrarchan model; rather, it draws a little from both traditions. Like Petrarch’s sonnets, the poem divides thematically into an octet and a sextet: The first eight lines introduce the sound of the scythe and then muse about the abstract (heat, silence) or imaginary (elves) significance of this sound; the last six lines present an alternative interpretation, celebrating fact and nothing more. But *Mowing* also hinges, like Shakespeare’s sonnets, on its two final lines. In terms of meter, each line comprises five stressed syllables separated by varying numbers of unstressed syllables. Only one line (12) can reasonably be read as strictly iambic.

4.7 *Birches* (1916)

When the narrator looks at the birch trees in the forest, he imagines that the arching bends in their branches are the result of a boy “swinging” on them. He realizes that the bends are actually caused by ice storms - the weight of the ice on the branches forces them to bend toward the ground - but he prefers his idea of the boy swinging on the branches, climbing up the tree trunks and swinging from side to side, from earth up to heaven. The narrator remembers when he used to swing on birches and wishes that he could return to those carefree days.

Analysis

The title is "Birches," but the subject is birch "swinging." And the theme of poem seems to be, more generally and more deeply, this motion of swinging. The force behind it comes from contrary pulls—truth and imagination, earth and heaven, concrete and spirit, control and abandon, flight and return. We have the earth below, we have the world of the treetops and above, and we have the motion between these two poles.

The whole upward thrust of the poem is toward imagination, escape, and transcendence—and away from heavy Truth with a capital T. The downward pull is back to earth. Likely everyone understands the desire "to get away from the earth awhile." The attraction of climbing trees is likewise universal. Who would not like to climb above the fray, to leave below the difficulties or drudgery of the everyday, particularly when one is "weary of considerations, / And life is too much like a pathless wood." One way to navigate a pathless wood is to climb a tree. But this act of climbing is not necessarily so pragmatically motivated: For the boy, it is a form of play; for the man, it is a transcendent escape. In either case, climbing birches seems synonymous with imagination and the imaginative act, a push toward the ethereal, and even the contemplation of death.

But the speaker does not leave it at that. He does not want his wish half- fulfilled—does not want to be left, so to speak, out on a limb. If climbing trees is a sort of push toward transcendence, then complete transcendence means never to come back down. But this speaker is not someone who puts much stock in the promise of an afterlife. He rejects the self-delusional extreme of imagination, and he reinforces his ties to the earth. He says, "Earth's the right place for love," however imperfect, though his "face burns" and "one eye is weeping." He must escape to keep his sanity; yet he must return to keep going. He wants to push "*[t]oward*heaven" to the limits of earthly possibility, but to go too far is to be lost. The upward motion requires a complement, a swing in the other direction to maintain a livable balance.

And that is why the birch tree is the perfect vehicle. As a tree, it is rooted in the ground; in climbing it, one has not completely severed ties to the earth. Moreover, as the final leap back down takes skill, experience, and courage, it is not a mere retreat but a new trajectory. Thus, one's path up and down the birch is one that is "good both going and coming back." The "Truth" of the ice storm does not interfere for long; for the poet looks at bent trees and imagines another truth: nothing less than a recipe for how to live well.

A poem as richly textured as *Birches* yields no shortage of interpretations. The poem is whole and lovely at the literal level, but it invites the reader to look below the surface and build his or her own understanding. The important thing for the interpreter is to attune her reading to the elements of the poem that may suggest other meanings. One such crucial element is the aforementioned swinging motion between opposites. Notice the contrast between Truth and what the speaker prefers to imagine happened to the birch trees. But also note that Truth, as the speaker relates it, is highly figurative and imaginative: Ice storms are described in terms of the "inner dome of

heaven," and bent trees as girls drying their hair in the sun. This sort of truth calls into question whether the speaker believes there is, in fact, a capital-T Truth.

The language of the poem—the vocabulary and rhythms—is very conversational and, in parts, gently humorous: "But I was going to say when Truth broke in / With all her matter of fact about the ice storm." But the folksiness does not come at the cost of accuracy or power; the description of the post-ice storm birch trees is vivid and evocative. Nor is this poem isolated, with its demotic vocabulary, from the pillars of poetic tradition. The "pathless wood" in line 44 enters into a dialogue with the whole body of Frost's work—a dialogue that goes back to the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* . And compare line 13 with these well-known lines from Shelley's elegy for Keats, "Adonais": "Life, like a dome of many colour'd glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity, / Until death tramples it to fragments." In *Birches*, the pieces of heaven shattered and sprinkled on the ground present another comparison between the imaginative and the concrete, a description of Truth that undermines itself by invoking an overthrown, now poetic scheme of celestial construction (heavenly spheres). Shelley's stanza continues: "Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek." Frost's speaker wants to climb*toward* heaven but then dip back down to earth—not to reach what he seeks but to seek and then swing back into the orbit of the world.

Frost also imbues the poem with distinct sexual imagery. The idea of tree-climbing, on its own, has sexual overtones. The following lines are more overt:

One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer.

As are these more sensual:

You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.

The whole process of birch swinging iterates that of sex, and at least one critic has noted that *Birches* is a poem about erotic fantasy, about a lonely, isolated boy who yearns to conquer these trees sexually. It is a testament to the richness of the poem that it fully supports readings as divergent as those mentioned here—and many more.

Two more items to consider: First, reread the poem and think about the possible connections between getting "away from the earth for awhile" (line 48) and death. Consider the viewpoint of the speaker and where he seems to be at in his life. Secondly, when the speaker proclaims, in line 52, "Earth's the right place for love," this is the first mention of love in the poem. Of what kind of love does he speak? There are many kinds of love, just as there are many potential objects of love. Try relating this *love* to the rest of the poem.

Form

This is blank verse, with numerous variations on the prevailing iambic foot.

4.8 *Home Burial* (1914)

In this narrative poem, Frost describes a tense conversation between a rural husband and wife whose child has recently died. As the poem opens, the wife is standing at the top of a staircase looking at her child's grave through the window. Her husband, at the bottom of the stairs, does not understand what she is looking at or why she has suddenly become so distressed. The wife resents her husband's obliviousness and attempts to leave the house. The husband begs her to stay and talk to him about her grief; he does not understand why she is angry with him for manifesting his grief in a different way. Inconsolable, the wife lashes out at him, convinced of his apathy toward their dead child. The husband mildly accepts her anger, but the rift between them remains. She leaves the house as he angrily threatens to drag her back by force.

Analysis

One should pay special attention to the tone, vocabulary, and phrasing of the dialogue. At the time of *Home Burial*'s publication, it represented a truly new poetic genre: an extended dramatic exercise in the natural speech rhythms of a region's people, from the mouths of common, yet vivid, characters.

Home Burial is one of Frost's most overtly sad poems. There are at least two tragedies here: the death of a child, which antecedes the poem, and the collapse of a marriage, which the poem foreshadows. "Home Burial" is about grief and grieving, but most of all it seems to be about the breakdown and limits of communication.

The husband and the wife represent two very different ways of grieving. The wife's grief infuses every part of her and does not wane with time. She has been compared to a female character in Frost's *A Masque of Mercy,* of whom another character says, "She's had some loss she can't accept from God." The wife remarks that most people make only pretense of following a loved one to the grave, when in truth their minds are "making the best of their way back to life / And living people, and things they understand." She, however, will not accept this kind of grief, will not turn from the grave back to the world of living, for to do so is to accept the death. Instead she declares that "the world's evil."

The husband, on the other hand, has accepted the death. Time has passed, and he might be more likely now to say, "That's the way of the world," than, "The world's evil." He did grieve, but the outward indications of his grief were quite different from those of his wife. He threw himself into the horrible task of digging his child's grave—into physical work. This action further associates the father with a "way-of-the-world" mentality, with the cycles that make up the farmer's life, and with an organic view of life and death. The father did not leave the task of burial to someone else, instead, he physically dug into the earth and planted his child's body in the soil.

One might say that any form of grief in which the bereaved stubbornly finds the world "evil" is not a very healthy one. One could also claim that the bereaved who never talks through his grief—

who never speaks of it—is doing himself and others injury. But, again, the purpose of the poem isn't really to determine the right way to grieve. Rather, it intends to portray a failure of empathy and communication. Each person fails to appreciate the other's grieving process—fails to credit it, allow it, and have patience with it. And each fails to alter even slightly his or her own form of grief in order to accommodate the other.

Note how utterly the woman misunderstands the man's actions. To her, the act of burying the child was one of supreme indifference, while to him it must have been one of supreme suffering—an attempt to convince himself, through physical labor, that this is the natural order of things; or an act of self-punishment, a penance befitting the horror of the loss; or simply a way of steeping himself in his grief, of forcing it into the muscles of his arms and back, of feeling it in the dirt on his clothes. Note, too, how the wife completely fails to grasp the meaning of her husband's words: " 'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.' " Indisposed to see her husbands form of grieving as acceptable, she takes his words as literal, inappropriate comments on fence building. Yet they have everything to do with the little body in the darkened parlor. He is talking about death, about the futility of human effort, about fortune and misfortune, about the unfairness of fate and nature.

And yet, the man is also partially to blame. If he had any understanding of how to communicate to her, he would not leave everything unspoken. He would make some concession to her needs and articulate a brief defense. "You misunderstand," he might say. "When I said that, it was because that was the only way I could say anything at all about our loss." Instead, he lets her accusations float in the air, as if they were just hysteria and nonsense and not worth challenging. This displays a lack of empathy and a failure of communication as fatal as hers. When she describes his heartless act of grave digging, he says only, "I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. / I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed." This leaves her free to believe that he accepts her accusation, that the curse refers to his hard-heartedness and not the terrible irony of her misinterpretation. He uses irony where she requires clarity. She needs him to admit to agony, and he can grant her no more than veiled references to a substratum of unspoken grief. And in the face of her griefs obvious persistence, he makes a callous—or, at very least, extremely counterproductive—remark: "I do think, though, you overdo it a little."

How important a role does gender play in this tragedy? Certainly it has some relevance. There are the husband's futile, abortive physical threats, as if he could physically coerce her into sharing her grief—but these are impulses of desperation. And both husband and wife acknowledge that there are separate spheres of being and understanding. "Cant a man speak of his own child he's lost?" asks the husband. "I don't know rightly whether any man can," she replies. A little later he laments, "A man must partly give up being a man / With womenfolk." He sees his taciturnity and his inability to say the appropriate thing as a masculine trait, and she seems to agree. (Yet she sees his quiet grave digging as nearly inhuman.) Additionally, it is fairly standard to assume that more outward emotion is permitted of women than of men—the tragedy of this poem might then be seen as an exacerbation of a pervasive inequality. Yet one enduring stereotype of gender distinctions is the man's inability to read between the lines, his failure to apprehend the emotions underlying the literal meaning of the woman's words. In this poem, husband and wife fail equally

in this manner. A woman, perhaps, might be less likely to dig a grave to vent her grief, but she is just as likely to react to death by withdrawal or by immersion in quotidian tasks. The reader witnesses the breakdown of a marriage (the burial of a home, expressed in the title's double entendre), but more basically, this is a breakdown of human communication.

Partly, that breakdown is due to the inescapable limits of any communication. Much of the literature of the twentieth century stems from an acknowledgement of these limits, from attempts to grapple with them and, paradoxically, express them. Most of Frost's poetry deals with an essential loneliness, which is linked to the limits of empathy and the sense that some things are simply inexpressible. What can one really say about the loss of one's child? Can one adequately convey one's grief on such an occasion? Is empathy—always a challenge—doomed to fail under such particular strain?

We should note in passing—though it is not of merely passing importance—that Frost knew firsthand the experience of losing children. His firstborn son, Elliott, died of cholera at the age of three. Later, his infant daughter died. Two more of his children died fairly young, one by suicide.

Form

This is a dramatic lyric—"dramatic" in that, like traditional drama; it presents a continuous scene and employs primarily dialogue rather than narrative or description. It is dramatic, too, in its subject matter—"dramatic" in the sense of "emotional" or "tense." Form fits content well in this poem: One can easily imagine two actors onstage portraying this brief, charged scene. Rhythmically, Frost approaches pure speech—and some lines, taken out of context, sound as prosaic as anything. For example, line 62: "I do think, though, you overdo it a little." Generally, there are five stressed syllables per line, although (as in line 62), they are not always easy to scan with certainty. Stanza breaks occur where quoted speech ends or begins.

4.9 *The Wood-Pile*

Summary

The speaker is walking through a frozen swamp. He considers going back but decides to continue. A small bird flies ahead of him, interacting with him cautiously. Then the speaker happens upon a decayed woodpile, for which he forgets the bird. He wonders who made the pile and why that person left it there to rot.

Analysis

A wanderer in a strange landscape realizes he is "far from home" and decides to turn back. But something urges him to go farther, deeper, to become thoroughly lost. As soon as he resolves himself to do so, a guide in the form of an animal appears and leads him onward. Sound like a classic formula of fairytale and myth? Such journeys, in the mythologies of the world, lead to revelation, understanding, and transformation. Frost's poetry is full of roads and paths; of travelers en route waylaid by indecision, by their sense of the gravity of the choice. In "The Wood-Pile," the speaker's decision to go on comes easily, but one has difficulty articulating where the journey ultimately takes him. This poem is immensely appealing, it talks of decay.

Something about human effort, in any arena, and what it comes to. It hints at despair but does not wholly despair in its subject (for the last two lines are immensely beautiful; they carve themselves—or ought to—a permanent place in the language). But what that something *is* is difficult to say with certainty. A better approach to a difficult poem may be to flesh out our intuitions and observations and see where that leaves us.

Lines 1 through 10 set the scene. After this quasi-introduction, the poem moves from bemusement (aimed at the bird) to studious contemplation (the why and wherefore of the woodpile) to what strikes me as a sharp realization of despair in the last two lines. What is the source of this despair? It may be recognition of a general condition of life—that life decays into death—or the fate of human labor—that it is futile, that its fruits decay. Or it may be recognition of tragedy specific to *this* occurrence. "I thought that only / Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks / Could so forget his handiwork," the speaker says, but what if this is euphemistic? Perhaps what the speaker really feels goes unspoken, and this is just whistling in the dark. If one explanation for why one would abandon such hard work is that the person "lived in turning to fresh tasks," the other—perhaps more plausible—is that tragedy has struck. Which is to say, at worst, perhaps the person no longer lives at all. The speaker recognizes the woodpile as the visual, decaying reminder of an unknown tragedy, and it is slowly disintegrating. This is like a darker take on "The Tuft of Flowers," where an artifact of human endeavor brings unadulterated joy.

Yet slow fires bring warmth; is the despair, then, really so unmixed and monochrome? The penultimate line gives a strange sense of agency to the woodpile: "as best it could." As if the warming of this frozen, otherwise featureless swamp has become a worthwhile task, which the woodpile strives to accomplish to the best of its ability. But who is it worthwile for, the swamp or the speaker, is not known. If warmth is in the mind of the beholder, perhaps the woodpile has indeed warmed the frozen swamp—by being incongruous; by adding features to a repetitive, unwelcoming landscape; and by turning the speaker's thoughts to human presence in such a place.

A few more questions the reader might ask herself: Why is the speaker in the swamp, and why does he decide to keep going? He seems to be seeking something—something notable. This something is not amusement, for he soon dismisses the bird. Rather, the speaker seeks something more somber and thought-provoking—something ultimately of human construction. Returning to the bird, is the speaker's dismissal of it as "foolish" meant ironically? For it certainly seems ironic to accuse the bird of taking "[e]verything said as personal to himself" when this is just what the speaker is doing with the bird. He sees a bird in front of him flitting from tree to tree and presumes that the bird is regarding him, considering him warily, concerned with what he will do. The speaker is, in effect, taking nature as personally conversing with him—as if nature were concerned with what decision he makes, whether he goes back or keeps on, whether he goes after a bird or watches a woodpile. Perhaps the site of the decaying woodpile conveys to the speaker the depth of nature's unconcern.

Form

The Wood-Pile generally follows the Frostian 5-stress line but strains it more than usual. However, the strain is to the formal regularity and not to the sound of the poem—which, for Frost, comes first. Some lines are blank verse, as follows:

*"To **warm** the **fro**zen **swamp**as **best** it **could**"*

However, other lines present more stress and great irregularity, as in line 26 with its six stresses and spondaic emphasis on this year's snow:

*No **run**ner **tracks** in **this year's snow** looped **near** it*

Others simply mix and match feet to achieve natural speech rhythms. Such is the case in line 22, which can be scanned several different ways (here are two):

*He **went** | be**hind** | it to | **make** his | **last stand**.*
*He **went** | be**hind** it | to **make** | his **last** | **stand**.*

The result of this formal variation is a poem that sounds like the speech of a good storyteller but looks and reads like poetry.

There is no discernable rhyme pattern, although the first and last lines conspicuously rhyme (and reinforce each other: *gray day* and *decay*). *Tasks* and*ax* rhyme near the poem's conclusion, and several end-words repeat: *see, here,tree* and *trees, him* and *himself.*

4.10 *The Gift Outright* (1941)

Summary

The narrator describes America's history as a nation from the time of the European colonists. Although the colonists owned the land, they could not draw a national identity from it because they were still tied to England. They eventually realized that they were denying their beliefs in freedom and, by embracing the lessons of the land, were able to establish an American identity. In order to accept this gift of identity, the people had to commit many acts of war and mark the land as their own, but the end result was a truly American land.

Analysis

This poem is technically a sonnet, though unusual in this form because of its sixteen lines. It is written in iambic pentameter and free verse.

This poem was written as early as 1936, but Frost did not publish it until 1941, a few months after the United States entered World War II. Although it had already achieved a level of familiarity and fame among the American public, *The Gift Outright* received special attention when Frost recited it at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. Frost had originally planned to recite a poem entitled "Dedication" that he had written for the event. However, because of the glare of the sun and his poor eyesight (he was eighty-seven years old at the time), he was unable to read his copy of the poem and instead recited *The Gift Outright*.

From one perspective, this poem may seem to be nothing more than a triumphantly patriotic work; Frost himself once compared it to *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The colonists in America initially struggled to become one with the land because of their ties to England. As years passed, however, they were able to build a commitment to the land and establish their identities as Americans because of their efforts to build a land that was not based on the traditions of Europe. In this way, the poem can be read as Frost's personal celebration of manifest destiny.

The broad enthusiasm for America that characterizes the poem takes an unexpected turn in the grave thirteenth line: "(The deed of gift was many deeds of war.)" Suddenly, the poem is not only about a commitment to the land, but also a discussion of the Revolutionary War and remorse that the battle over the land caused so many deaths. The use of parentheses in this particular line ensures that the specifics of the war are not mentioned, but does insist that the memory of the war should not be forgotten or cast aside.

The poem can also be read as somewhat defensive and even belligerent in terms of its approach to the land. Frost repeats the term "ours" numerous times in the text, but insists that the "we" of the poem is the white settlers from Europe, rather than the original "owners" of the land: the Native Americans. Frost chooses to ignore the conflict between the colonists and the Native Americans and instead focuses on the clash between the Old World and the New World, the European world of tradition and oppression and the new American world of freedom and destiny. As a result, the type of American identity that Frost expresses is very different from the contemporary understanding of the American identity as an amalgamation of different cultures and ethnicities.

5. Frost's Contribution to American Literature

Robert Frost holds a unique and almost isolated position in American letters. "Though his career fully spans the modern period and though it is impossible to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet," writes James M. Cox, "it is difficult to place him in the main tradition of modern poetry." In a sense, Frost stands at the crossroads of nineteenth-century American poetry and modernism, for in his verse may be found the culmination of many nineteenth-century tendencies and traditions as well as parallels to the works of his twentieth-century contemporaries. Taking his symbols from the public domain, Frost developed, as many critics note, an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. On the other hand, as Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor point out in *Poems for Study*, "Frost's poetry, unlike that of such contemporaries as Eliot, Stevens, and the later Yeats, shows no marked departure from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century." Although he avoids traditional verse forms and only uses rhyme erratically, Frost is not an innovator and his technique is never experimental.

Frost's theory of poetic composition ties him to both centuries. Like the nineteenth-century Romantics, he maintained that a poem is "never a put-up job.... It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a loneliness. It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness." Yet, "working out his own version of the 'impersonal' view of art," as Hyatt H. Waggoner observed, Frost also upheld T. S. Eliot's idea that the man who suffers and the artist who creates are totally separate. In a 1932 letter to Sydney Cox, Frost explained his

conception of poetry: "The objective idea is all I ever cared about. Most of my ideas occur in verse.... To be too subjective with what an artist has managed to make objective is to come on him presumptuously and render ungraceful what he in pain of his life had faith he had made graceful."

To accomplish such objectivity and grace, Frost took up nineteenth-century tools and made them new. Lawrence Thompson has explained that, according to Frost, "the self-imposed restrictions of meter in form and of coherence in content" work to a poet's advantage; they liberate him from the experimentalist's burden—the perpetual search for new forms and alternative structures. Thus Frost, as he himself put it in *"The Constant Symbol,"* wrote his verse regular; he never completely abandoned conventional metrical forms for free verse, as so many of his contemporaries were doing. At the same time, his adherence to meter, line length, and rhyme scheme was not an arbitrary choice. He maintained that "the freshness of a poem belongs absolutely to its not having been thought out and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music." He believed, rather, that the poem's particular mood dictated or determined the poet's "first commitment to metre and length of line."

Critics frequently point out that Frost complicated his problem and enriched his style by setting traditional meters against the natural rhythms of speech. Drawing his language primarily from the vernacular, he avoided artificial poetic diction by employing the accent of a soft-spoken New Englander. In *The Function of Criticism,*Yvor Winters faulted Frost for his "endeavor to make his style approximate as closely as possible the style of conversation." But what Frost achieved in his poetry was much more complex than a mere imitation of the New England farmer idiom. He wanted to restore to literature the "sentence sounds that underlie the words," the "vocal gesture" that enhances meaning. That is, he felt the poet's ear must be sensitive to the voice in order to capture with the written word the significance of sound in the spoken word. *The Death of the Hired Man,* for instance, consists almost entirely of dialogue between Mary and Warren, her farmer-husband, but critics have observed that in this poem Frost takes the prosaic patterns of their speech and makes them lyrical. To Ezra Pound *The Death of the Hired Man* represented Frost at his best—when he "dared to write ... in the natural speech of New England; in natural spoken speech, which is very different from the 'natural' speech of the newspapers, and of many professors."

Frost's use of New England dialect is only one aspect of his often discussed regionalism. Within New England, his particular focus was on New Hampshire, which he called "one of the two best states in the Union," the other being Vermont. In an essay entitled "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation," W. G. O'Donnell noted how from the start, in *A Boy's Will,* "Frost had already decided to give his writing a local habitation and a New England name, to root his art in the soil that he had worked with his own hands." Reviewing *North of Boston* in the *New Republic,* Amy Lowell wrote, "Not only is his work New England in subject, it is so in technique.... Mr. Frost has reproduced both people and scenery with a vividness which is extraordinary." Many other critics have lauded Frost's ability to realistically evoke the New England landscape; they point out that one can visualize an orchard in *After Apple-Picking* or imagine spring in a farmyard in *Two Tramps in Mud Time*. In this "ability to portray the local truth in nature," O'Donnell claims, Frost has no peer. The same ability prompted Pound to declare,

"I know more of farm life than I did before I had read his poems. That means I know more of 'Life.'"

Frost's regionalism, critics remark, is in his realism, not in politics; he creates no picture of regional unity or sense of community. In *The Continuity of American Poetry,* Roy Harvey Pearce describes Frost's protagonists as individuals who are constantly forced to confront their individualism as such and to reject the modern world in order to retain their identity. Frost's use of nature is not only similar but closely tied to this regionalism. He stays as clear of religion and mysticism as he does of politics. What he finds in nature is sensuous pleasure; he is also sensitive to the earth's fertility and to man's relationship to the soil. To critic M. L. Rosenthal, Frost's pastoral quality, his "lyrical and realistic repossession of the rural and 'natural,'" is the staple of his reputation.

Yet, just as Frost is aware of the distances between one man and another, so he is also always aware of the distinction, the ultimate separateness, of nature and man. Marion Montgomery has explained, "His attitude toward nature is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries" between individual man and natural forces. Below the surface of Frost's poems are dreadful implications, what Rosenthal calls his "shocked sense of the helpless cruelty of things." This natural cruelty is at work in "Design" and in "Once by the Pacific." The ominous tone of these two poems prompted Rosenthal's further comment: "At his most powerful Frost is as staggered by 'the horror' as Eliot and approaches the hysterical edge of sensibility in a comparable way.... His is still the modern mind in search of its own meaning."

The austere and tragic view of life that emerges in so many of Frost's poems is modulated by his metaphysical use of detail. As Frost portrays him, man might be alone in an ultimately indifferent universe, but he may nevertheless look to the natural world for metaphors of his own condition. Thus, in his search for meaning in the modern world, Frost focuses on those moments when the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the spiritual intersect. John T. Napier calls this Frost's ability "to find the ordinary a matrix for the extraordinary." In this respect, he is often compared withEmily Dickinson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, in whose poetry, too, a simple fact, object, person, or event will be transfigured and take on greater mystery or significance. The poem "Birches" is an example: it contains the image of slender trees bent to the ground- temporarily by a boy's swinging on them or permanently by an ice-storm. But as the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that the speaker is concerned not only with child's play and natural phenomena, but also with the point at which physical and spiritual reality merge.

Such symbolic import of mundane facts informs many of Frost's poems, and in "Education by Poetry" he explained: "Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, 'grace' metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.... Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere."

Frost's own poetical education began in San Francisco where he was born in 1874, but he found his place of safety in New England when his family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1884

following his father's death. The move was actually a return, for Frost's ancestors were originally New Englanders. The region must have been particularly conducive to the writing of poetry because within the next five years Frost had made up his mind to be a poet. In fact, he graduated from Lawrence High School, in 1892, as class poet (he also shared the honor of co-valedictorian with his wife-to-be Elinor White); and two years later, the *New York Independent* accepted his poem entitled *My Butterfly*, launching his status as a professional poet with a check for $15.00.

To celebrate his first publication, Frost had a book of six poems privately printed; two copies of *Twilight* were made—one for himself and one for his fiancee. Over the next eight years, however, he succeeded in having only thirteen more poems published. During this time, Frost sporadically attended Dartmouth and Harvard and earned a living teaching school and, later, working a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. But in 1912, discouraged by American magazines' constant rejection of his work, he took his family to England, where he could "write and be poor without further scandal in the family." In England, Frost found the professional esteem denied him in his native country. Continuing to write about New England, he had two books published, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, which established his reputation so that his return to the United States in 1915 was as a celebrated literary figure. Holt put out an American edition of*North of Boston*, and periodicals that had once scorned his work now sought it.

Since 1915 Frost's position in American letters has been firmly rooted; in the years before his death he came to be considered the unofficial poet laureate of the United States. On his seventy-fifth birthday, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution in his honor which said, "His poems have helped to guide American thought and humor and wisdom, setting forth to our minds a reliable representation of ourselves and of all men." In 1955, the State of Vermont named a mountain after him in Ripton, the town of his legal residence; and at the presidential inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961, Frost was given the unprecedented honor of being asked to read a poem.

Though Frost allied himself with no literary school or movement, the imagists helped at the start to promote his American reputation. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* published his work before others began to clamor for it. It also published a review by Ezra Pound of the British edition of *A Boy's Will*, which Pound said "has the tang of the New Hampshire woods, and it has just this utter sincerity. It is not post-Miltonic or post-Swinburnian or post Kiplonian. This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it." Amy Lowell reviewed *North of Boston*in the *New Republic*, and she, too, sang Frost's praises: "He writes in classic metres in a way to set the teeth of all the poets of the older schools on edge; and he writes in classic metres, and uses inversions and cliches whenever he pleases, those devices so abhorred by the newest generation. He goes his own way, regardless of anyone else's rules, and the result is a book of unusual power and sincerity." In these first two volumes, Frost introduced not only his affection for New England themes and his unique blend of traditional meters and colloquialism, but also his use of dramatic monologues and dialogues. "Mending Wall," the leading poem in *North of Boston,*describes the friendly argument between the speaker and his neighbor as they walk along their common wall replacing fallen stones; their differing attitudes toward "boundaries" offer symbolic significance typical of the poems in these early collections.

Mountain Interval marked Frost's turn to another kind of poem, a brief meditation sparked by an object, person or event. Like the monologues and dialogues, these short pieces have a dramatic quality. "Birches," discussed above, is an example, as is "The Road Not Taken," in which a fork in a woodland path transcends the specific. The distinction of this volume, the *Boston Transcript* said, "is that Mr. Frost takes the lyricism of *A Boy's Will* and plays a deeper music and gives a more intricate variety of experience."

Several new qualities emerged in Frost's work with the appearance of *New Hampshire,* particularly a new self-consciousness and willingness to speak of himself and his art. The volume, for which Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize, "pretends to be nothing but a long poem with notes and grace notes," as Louis Untermeyer described it. The title poem, approximately fourteen pages long, is a "rambling tribute" to Frost's favorite state and "is starred and dotted with scientific numerals in the manner of the most profound treatise." Thus, a footnote at the end of a line of poetry will refer the reader to another poem seemingly inserted to merely reinforce the text of "New Hampshire." Some of these poems are in the form of epigrams, which appear for the first time in Frost's work. *Fire and Ice,* for example, one of the better known epigrams, speculates on the means by which the world will end. Frost's most famous and, according to J. McBride Dabbs, most perfect lyric, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,* is also included in this collection; conveying "the insistent whisper of death at the heart of life," the poem portrays a speaker who stops his sleigh in the midst of a snowy woods only to be called from the inviting gloom by the recollection of practical duties. Frost himself said of this poem that it is the kind he'd like to print on one page followed with "forty pages of footnotes."

West-Running Brook, Frost's fifth book of poems, is divided into six sections, one of which is taken up entirely by the title poem. This poem refers to a brook which perversely flows west instead of east to the Atlantic like all other brooks. A comparison is set up between the brook and the poem's speaker who trusts himself to go by "contraries"; further rebellious elements exemplified by the brook give expression to an eccentric individualism, Frost's stoic theme of resistance and self-realization. Reviewing the collection in the *New York Herald Tribune,* Babette Deutsch wrote: "The courage that is bred by a dark sense of Fate, the tenderness that broods over mankind in all its blindness and absurdity, the vision that comes to rest as fully on kitchen smoke and lapsing snow as on mountains and stars—these are his, and in his seemingly casual poetry, he quietly makes them ours."

A Further Range, which earned Frost another Pulitzer Prize and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, contains two groups of poems subtitled *Taken Doubly* and *Taken Singly*. In the first, and more interesting, of these groups, the poems are somewhat didactic, though there are humorous and satiric pieces as well. Included here is *Two Tramps in Mud Time,* which opens with the story of two itinerant lumbermen who offer to cut the speaker's wood for pay; the poem then develops into a sermon on the relationship between work and play, vocation and avocation, preaching the necessity to unite them. Of the entire volume, William Rose Benet wrote, "It is better worth reading than nine-tenths of the books that will come your way this year. In a time when all kinds of insanity are assailing the nations it is good to listen to this quiet humor, even about a hen, a

hornet, or Square Matthew.... And if anybody should ask me why I still believe in my land, I have only to put this book in his hand and answer, 'Well-here is a man of my country.'"

Most critics acknowledge that Frost's poetry in the forties and fifties grew more and more abstract, cryptic, and even sententious, so it is generally on the basis of his earlier work that he is judged. His political conservatism and religious faith, hitherto informed by skepticism and local color, became more and more the guiding principles of his work. He had been, as Randall Jarrell points out, "a very odd and very radical radical when young" yet became "sometimes callously and unimaginatively conservative" in his old age. He had become a public figure, and in the years before his death, much of his poetry was written from this stance.

Reviewing *A Witness Tree* in *Books,* Wilbert Snow noted a few poems "which have a right to stand with the best things he has written": "Come In," "The Silken Tent," and "Carpe Diem" especially. Yet Snow went on: "Some of the poems here are little more than rhymed fancies; others lack the bullet-like unity of structure to be found in *North of Boston.*" On the other hand, Stephen Vincent Benet felt that Frost had "never written any better poems than some of those in this book." Similarly, critics were let down by *In the Clearing.* One wrote, "Although this reviewer considers Robert Frost to be the foremost contemporary U.S. poet, he regretfully must state that most of the poems in this new volume are disappointing.... [They] often are closer to jingles than to the memorable poetry we associate with his name." Another maintained that "the bulk of the book consists of poems of 'philosophic talk.' Whether you like them or not depends mostly on whether you share the 'philosophy.'"

Indeed, many readers do share Frost's philosophy, and still others who do not nevertheless continue to find delight and significance in his large body of poetry. In October, 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered a speech at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library in Amherst, Massachusetts. "In honoring Robert Frost," the President said, "we therefore can pay honor to the deepest source of our national strength. That strength takes many forms and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant.... Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost." The poet would probably have been pleased by such recognition, for he had said once, in an interview with Harvey Breit: "One thing I care about, and wish young people could care about, is taking poetry as the first form of understanding. If poetry isn't understanding all, the whole world, then it isn't worth anything."

Frost's poetry is revered to this day. When a previously unknown poem by Frost titled *War Thoughts at Home*, was discovered and dated to 1918, it was subsequently published in the fall, 2006, edition of the *Virginia Quartely Review.*

6. Questions

1. What attitudes toward the passage of time are expressed in Frost's poems?

2. What are the common themes found in Frost's poetry?

3. Do we find any characters in Frost’s poems? If yes, who are they?

4. What are the symbolic devices used by Frost in his poems?

5. Why does Frost choose to write about everyday life in a rural environment? What is the effect of this choice on his poetry?

6. How does Frost's personal life influence his poetry?

7. Further Readings of Robert Frost

- *"In White": Frost's Early Version Of Design*
- *A Boundless Moment*
- *A Brook In The City*
- *A Cliff Dwelling*
- *A Considerable Speck*
- *A Dream Pang*
- *A Late Walk*
- *A Line-Storm Song*
- *A Minor Bird*
- *A Patch of Old Snow*
- *A Prayer in Spring*
- *A Question*
- *A Servant To Servants*
- *A Soldier*
- *A Time to Talk*
- *Acquainted with the Night*
- *After Apple Picking*
- *An Old Man's Winter Night*
- *Asking for Roses*
- *Bereft*
- *Birches*
- *Blueberries*
- *Bond And Free*
- *But outer Space*
- *Canis Major*
- *Carpe Diem*
- *Christmas Trees*
- *Come In*
- *Departmental*
- *Desert Places*
- *Design*
- *Devotion*
- *Dust of Snow*
- *Evening In A Sugar Orchard*
- *Fire and Ice*
- *Fireflies in the Garden*
- *Flower-Gathering*
- *For Once, Then, Something*
- *Fragmentary Blue*
- *Gathering Leaves*
- *Ghost House*
- *God's Garden*
- *Going For Water*
- *Good-bye, and Keep Cold*
- *Hannibal*
- *Home Burial*
- *Hyla Brook*

- *In a Disused Graveyard*
- *In A Poem*
- *In A Vale*
- *In Equal Sacrifice*
- *In Hardwood Groves*
- *In Neglect*
- *In White*
- *Into My Own*
- *Iota Subscript*
- *Iris By Night*
- *Leaves Compared with Flowers*
- *Love And A Question*
- *Meeting And Passing*
- *Mending Wall*
- *Mowing*
- *My Butterfly*
- *My November Guest*
- *Neither Out Far Nor In Deep*
- *Never Again Would Bird's Song Be the Same*
- *Not to Keep*
- *Nothing Gold Can Stay*
- *Now Close The Windows*
- *October*
- *On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations*
- *Once by the Pacific*
- *One Step Backward Taken*
- *Out, Out*
- *Pan With Us*
- *Plowmen*
- *Provide, Provide*
- *Putting In The Seed*
- *Quandary*
- *Range-Finding*
- *Reluctance*
- *Revelation*
- *Rose Pogonias*
- *Spoils Of The Dead*
- *Spring Pools*
- *Stars*
- *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*
- *Storm Fear*
- *The Aim Was Song*
- *The Armful*
- *The Axe-Helve*
- *The Bear*
- *The Black Cottage*
- *The Bonfire*
- *The Code—Heroics*
- *The Cow In Apple-Time*
- *The Death of the Hired Man*
- *The Demiurge's Laugh*
- *The Exposed Nest*
- *The Fear*
- *The Flower Boat*
- *The Gift Outright*
- *The Gum-Gatherer*
- *The Impulse*
- *The Line-Gang*
- *The Lockless Door*

- *The Master Speed*
- *The Mountain*
- *The Need of Being Versed in Country Things*
- *The Objection To Being Stepped On*
- *The Oft-Repeated Dream*
- *The Oven Bird*
- *The Pasture*
- *The Road Not Taken*
- *The Rose Family*
- *The Secret Sits*
- *The Silken Tent*
- *The Soldier*
- *The Sound of Trees*
- *The Span Of Life*
- *The Star Splitter*
- *The Telephone*
- *The Trial By Existence*
- *The Tuft of Flowers*
- *The Vanishing Red*
- *The Vantage Point*
- *The Wood-Pile*
- *They Were Welcome To Their Belief*
- *To E.T.*
- *To Earthward*
- *To The Thawing Wind*
- *Tree at my Window*
- *Two Look at Two*
- *Two Tramps in Mud Time*
- *Unharvested*
- *Waiting -- Afield At Dusk*
- *What Fifty Said..*
- *Wind And Window Flower*

Paper XVIII. American Literature- II

Unit. 5: Selected Poems- Wallace Stevens

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

1.2 Biographical Sketch of Wallace Stevens

1.3 Famous Poems of Wallace Stevens

1.4 Stevens'Style of Writing Poetry

2. Themes, Outlines and Symbols

2.1 Major Themes and Outlines of Stevens' Poems

2.2 Symbols in Stevens' Poems

3. Summary and Analysis of the following poems:

3.1 Sunday Morning

3.2 The Emperor of Ice-Cream

3.3 Anecdote of the Jar

3.4 Gray Room

3.5 On Modern poetry

3.6 Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

3.7 The Idea of Order at Key West

3.8 A High-Toned Old Christian Woman

5. Stevens' Contribution to American Literature

6. Questions

7. Further Readings of Wallace Stevens

1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives

This Unit provides a biographical sketch of Wallace Stevens, some of his famous poems and his general style of writing poetry. It is followed by a detailed study of their themes and outlines. The summary and analysis of a few of his famous poems are discussed next. It also includes a discussion about Steven's contribution to American Literature. This unit concludes with a set of questions and a list of further readings of Wallace Stevens to gain knowledge about the critical aspects of his works.

1.2 Biographical sketch of Wallace Stevens

Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on October 2, 1879, and died at the age of seventy-six in Hartford, Connecticut on August 2, 1955. He attended Harvard as a special student from 1897 to 1900 but did not graduate; he graduated from New York law school in 1903 and was admitted to the New York bar in 1904, the year he met Elsie Kachel, a young woman from Reading, whom he married in 1909. They had one daughter, Holly Bight, born in 1924, conceived on a leisurely ocean voyage California via the Panama Canal that they took to celebrate the publication of his first book.

Stevens became interested in verse-writing at Harvard, submitting material to the *Harvard Advocate*, but he would be 36 before his first work was published in 1915. He soon was contributing to *Poetry* (Chicago), and his first book *Harmonium* was published in 1923 by the distinguished firm of Alfred A. Knopf. Though he was always much admired by his contemporaries ("There is a man whose work," Hart Crane wrote of him in 1919, "makes most the rest of us quail"), Stevens felt that the reviews of his 1923 book were less than they should be, and discouraged, wrote nothing through the 1920s. For a second edition of *Harmonium*, published in 1931, he added only eight new poems.

If he was not writing in the 1920s, he was steadily advancing in business. After working for several New York law firms from 1904 to 1907, he had been hired as a bonding lawyer for an insurance firm in 1908, and by 1914 was hired as the vice-president of the New York Office of the Equitable Surety Co. of St. Louis. When this job was abolished as a result of mergers in 1916, he joined the home office of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity and left New York City to live in Hartford, where he would remain the rest of his life. By 1934, he had been named Vice President of his company.

All his life Stevens collected art from abroad and saw that packages of various gourmet foods were mailed to him regularly. Although he regularly traveled in the South, most notably to Florida and the Florida Keys and Cuba, he never ventured abroad. But his cosmopolitan yearnings were amply satisfied by regular jaunts to New York City. Trains leaving Hartford on a better-than-hourly basis guaranteed that any Saturday he could be on the streets of New York City by 10 a.m. In the 1930s and 1940s, he was welcomed as a member of the exclusive set centered around the artistic and literary devotees Barbara and Henry Church.

When Stevens began to write poems with renewed fluency in the 1930s, he arranged for them to be printed in limited editions at the same time as trade editions were prepared by Knopf. *Ideas of Order* (1935) and *Owl's Clover* (1937) were limited editions by the Alcestis Press, while *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937) and *Parts of a World* (1942) were printed by Knopf, and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and*Esthetique du Mal* were deluxe volumes issued by the Cummington Press in 1942.

In 1939, Stevens was sixty – an age when most poets are ready to look back on what career they might have made for themselves. But Stevens's best writing still lay before him in the form of extended meditative sequences, quasi-philosophical in their ruminative wanderings but marked always by a vivid sense of the absurd and a darting, whirling inventiveness that took delight in peculiar anecdotal examples. In the loosely connected stanzas of these sequences, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), "Esthetique du Mal" (1945), "The Auroras of Autumn" (1947) and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1950), Stevens perfected what had been, in effect, the work he had been producing all along – a metapoetry that took lavish delight in commenting upon its own making. At the same time, he began to grow interested in putting his thoughts on aesthetics together in prose sentences, essays he collected in 1951 as *The Necessary Angel.* And there was one final, magnificent turn to his development. Entering his seventies, he began to write a poetry of late old age, in which a sense of the disembodied, the purely mental, gave rise to a discourse that had grown newly austere, solemn, and strange even to its author.

Capturing so exuberantly yet so flawlessly the mind at play with an extravagance most often associated with youthful pleasure, with the sheer delights of the sensual body, Stevens preferred to mask his very great sensual satisfactions by suggesting that his doings were in fact all a highly proper set of speculations on "the imagination." (His prose essays were useful allies in this strategy.) But the sheer verve of local moments, the sumptuous texture of outstanding passages, simply dissolves as pretense the notion that a philosophical enterprise might be underway. Few poets have so fully enjoyed not just their indulgence in their own language but also the game that elaborately insists no such indulgence is occurring.

1.3 Famous Works of Wallace Stevens

Poetry

-*Harmonium* (1923)
-*Ideas of Order* (1935)
-*Owl's Clover* (1936)
-*The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937)
-*Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction* (1942)
-*Parts of a World* (1942)
-*Esthétique du Mal* (1945)
-*Three Academic Pieces* (1947)
-*Transport to Summer* (1947)

-*Primitive Like an Orb* (1948)
-*Auroras of Autumn* (1950)
-*Collected Poems* (1954)
-*Opus Posthumous* (1957)
-*The Palm at the End of the Mind* (1967)

Prose

-*The Necessary Angel* (1951)

Plays

-*Three Travellers Watch the Sunrise* (1916)
-*Carlos Among the Candles* (1917)

1.4 Stevens' Style of Writing Poetry

An early display of Stevens' expertise, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1923) employs a four-part symphonic form to intone modernist dissonance. The musical stanzas in *A Hymn to Impermanence* are each in their distinctive rhythm and line length. They arise from the playing on a Renaissance keyboard instrument by a rustic laborer, the director of the masque "Pyramus and Thisbe," which concludes William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Through a graphic scenario, his thoughts on the effects of music on the spirit draw an analogy with the beauty of Susanna, whose naked loveliness stirred the elders to pry into her private bliss. With a pun on bass/base, the poet ridicules the throb of passion in the old men that produces "pizzicati of Hosannas," a reference to the plucking of strings to produce a lightly separated flow of melody.

In Stanza 2, Stevens slows the four beats of the previous tetrameter to an emotionally composed two-beat dimeter interspersed with triplets or trimeter. The crescendo of drama replaces fluctuating strings with the clamor of cymbals and horns. Resuming a four-beat line, he elongates the lifting of lamps, by which ineffectual Byzantine attendants, arriving too late to be of help, disclose the elders leering at Susanna's nakedness. Departing from the legend, the poet closes with an ode to beauty, noting that the details of the story are secondary to the importance of beauty itself. Although Susanna's admirable physique could not last, the memory of her loveliness survives "Death's ironic scraping," leaving a memory as clear as the sweep of a bow over a viol. That, insists the poet, is the constant of art.

Derived from an agnostic era, "Sunday Morning" (1923), a 120-line blank verse statement of the conflict between faith and poetry, voices Stevens' long-running personal debate on the existence of God. The verbal music wraps the speaker in a sustaining melody. Content in her reverie, she avoids Christian ritual and traditions and questions, "What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams?" She finds spiritual renewal in "balm or beauty of the earth," which challenges trite, worn-out concepts of heaven.

Foremost in the speaker's doubt about an afterlife is the absence of completion, which she depicts as fruit that never ripens and rivers that never find the sea. Without death, she declares, mystical beauty has no aim, no fulfillment. The speaker exalts "the measures destined for her soul," a primitive concept that the absorption of the body into nature is a more appropriate form of immortality than heaven. Stanza 7 asserts that art, represented by human chanting, encapsulates history, that is, "whence they came and whither they shall go." Rounding out the poem is a return to the vision of wings, which bear "casual flocks of pigeons" to their graceful demise, emphasized by the alliteration of "Downward to darkness." As though enfolding a small portion of life, the span, unlike Christian images of up-stretched flight, embrace earth in their final moments.

In line with the thinking of "Sunday Morning," Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (1923) continues the thread of logic that death is an essential element of life. In two octaves bizarrely joyous in rhythm and tone, he arranges imperatives — call, bid, let bring, let be — to the attendants of the dead as the droll funereal rites take shape. The piling up of death images frames the finality of passage as well as an end to posturing, an end to desire. In a line that demystifies ritual grief, the cigar roller whips up "concupiscent curds" in kitchen cups, a lengthening of hard-edged cacophonies of alliterated K sounds to express the artificiality of mourning. Modern standards of grief take shape in the wenches' "usual" dress and boys bearing floral arrangements in discarded newspaper. However well performed, none of these actions stops the finality of death.

For good reason, Stevens repeats the title image in lines 8 and 16. The notion of decay, embodied in the dresser lacking knobs, expands with the image of failed pride, which the dead woman once depicted in embroidery as a peacock's spread tail. The feet of the deceased, grotesquely callused and oddly removed from the attendants' scurrying, symbolize the cold, unresponsive state of the corpse, now made dumb by the absence of speech. Like the bird's tail in stitchery, the "horny" feet have surrendered any connection with sexual desire or function. When the body is arranged and the lamp lighted, Stevens insists that earthly sway belongs to the emperor of ice cream, a theatrical mockery of permanence.

Celebrating poet and verse, "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1936) expresses Stevens' concept of art by dramatizing an unassuming singer lofting a song to the sea. The poet proposes an outlandish rearrangement of the usual romantic notions of the majestic sea: As though imposing artistic order on nature, the singer reduces the sea to "merely a place by which she walked to sing," uplifting herself by creating melody. In the poet's expanded view, the singer represents "the single artificer of the world," a station that elevates her above nature's "constant cry" with the imaginative ordering of notes into musical phrasing.

In lines 33 to 34, the poet-speaker, certain that the sea is not a mask or source of imitation for the singer, begins a series of hyperboles that place high value on the creative power of artistry. As the poem shifts away from the singer, the poet-speaker challenges philosopher Ramon Fernandez to explain another enigma — how light orders and arranges something so vast and insuperable as darkness. The implication is that mysticism poses no answer that can be expressed in human terms. In its final five-line stanza, an emotional "Oh" introduces a

prayerful apostrophe to order amid chaos. The poet, content with the limitations of human art, stops short of reconciling philosophy with art.

2. Themes, Outlines and Symbols

2.1 Major Themes and Outlines of Stevens' Poems

2.1.1 Imagination and reality

Stevens, whose work was meditative and philosophical, is very much a poet of ideas. "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully," he wrote. Concerning the relation between consciousness and the world, in Stevens's work "imagination" is not equivalent to consciousness nor is "reality" equivalent to the world as it exists outside our minds. Reality is the product of the imagination as it shapes the world. Because it is constantly changing as we attempt to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world, reality is an activity, not a static object. We approach reality with a piecemeal understanding, putting together parts of the world in an attempt to make it seem coherent. To make sense of the world is to construct a worldview through an active exercise of the imagination. This is no dry, philosophical activity, but a passionate engagement in finding order and meaning. Thus Stevens would write in *The Idea of Order at Key West*,

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

In his book *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens writes, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." But as the poet attempts to find a fiction to replace the lost gods, he immediately encounters a problem: a direct knowledge of reality is not possible.

Stevens suggests that we live in the tension between the shapes we take as the world acts upon us and the ideas of order that our imagination imposes upon the world. The world influences us in our most normal activities: "The dress of a woman of Lhassa, / In its place, / Is an invisible element of that place / Made visible." Likewise, were we to place a jar on a hill in Tennessee, we would impose an order onto the landscape.

As Stevens says in his essay "Imagination as Value", "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them." The imagination is the mechanism by which we unconsciously conceptualize the normal patterns of life, while reason is the way we consciously conceptualize these patterns.

2.1.2 Supreme fiction

Throughout his poetic career, Stevens was concerned with the question of what to think about the world now that our old notions of religion no longer suffice. His solution might be summarized by the notion of a "Supreme Fiction," an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for the idea of God, known to be fictive but willfully believed. In this example from the satirical "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens plays with the notions of immediately accessible, but ultimately unsatisfying, notions of reality:

Poetry is the supreme Fiction, madame.

Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms
Like windy citherns, hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
Madame, we are where we began.

The saxophones squiggle because, as J. Hillis Miller says of Stevens in his book, *Poets of Reality*, the theme of universal fluctuation is a constant theme throughout Stevens' poetry: "A great many of Stevens' poems show an object or group of objects in aimless oscillation or circling movement." In the end, reality remains.

The supreme fiction is that conceptualization of reality that seems to resonate in its rightness, so much so that it seems to have captured, if only for a moment, something actual and real.

I am the angel of reality,
seen for a moment standing in the door.
...
I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash;
...
an apparition appareled in
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?

In one of his last poems, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour", Stevens describes the experience of an idea which satisfies the imagination, "This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous. / It is in that thought that we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing." This one thing is "a light, a power, the miraculous influence" wherein we can forget ourselves, sensing a comforting order, "A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous, / within its vital boundary, in the mind."

This knowledge necessarily exists within the mind, since it is an aspect of the imagination which can never attain a direct experience of reality.

We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.
Out of this same light, out of the central mind
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.[40]

Stevens concludes that God is a human creation, but that feeling of rightness which for so long a time existed with the idea of God may be accessed again. This supreme fiction will be something equally central to our being, but contemporary to our lives, in a way that God can never again be. But with the right idea, we may again find the same sort of solace that we once found in divinity. "[Stevens] finds, too, a definite value in the complete contact with reality. Only, in fact, by this stark knowledge can he attain his own spiritual self that can resist the disintegrating forces of life . . . . Powerful force though the mind is . . . it cannot find the absolutes. Heaven lies about the seeing man in his sensuous apprehension of the world . . .; everything about him is part of the truth."
. . . Poetry
Exceeding music must take the place
Of empty heaven and its hymns,
Ourselves in poetry must take their place
In this way, Stevens's poems adopt attitudes that are corollaries to those earlier spiritual longings that persist in the unconscious currents of the imagination. "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning / And sends us, winged by an unconscious will, / To an immaculate end." The "first idea" is that essential reality that stands before all others, that essential truth; but since all knowledge is contingent on its time and place, that supreme fiction will surely be transitory. This is the necessary angel of subjective reality—a reality that must always be qualified—and as such, always misses the mark to some degree—always contains elements of unreality.

Miller summarizes Stevens's position: "Though this dissolving of the self is in one way the end of everything, in another way it is the happy liberation. There are only two entities left now that the gods are dead: man and nature, subject and object. Nature is the physical world, visible, audible, tangible, present to all the senses, and man is consciousness, the nothing which receives nature and transforms it into something unreal . . . ."

2.2 Symbols in Stevens' Poems

2.2.1 The Sun (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

The title of the poem is "Sunday Morning," and the "sun" is mentioned many times in the poem. Over the course of the poem, the sun goes from being a source of comfort to the woman sitting in the chair, to a symbol of the ultimate source of life and of the chaos in the natural world.

- Line 2: An image of a sunny chair lets us know that it is a warm, beautiful day. It sets up more symbolic uses of the sun later in the poem.
- Line 19: The sun is used as a synecdoche to represent other qualities or "comforts," like warmth, light, and growth. It also forms the beginning of a rhetorical question. The woman thinks that the comforts of the sun are just as good as the thought of heaven.

- Line 70: The shivering of the willow in the sun is an image of natural beauty, as well as a symbol for how death makes up for the loss of old things by bringing about new and different things.
- Lines 93-95: In this simile, the sun is compared to how a god "might be." The sun is not actually a god; it is "like" a "savage source," or a wild, divine force that creates things. The sun's heat and light is the source of all life, so the image is accurate. The sun is also personified as a "naked" being who dances with the men.
- Line 110: The sun is a symbol of chaos, because it can be wild and unpredictable. Sometimes, it grows crops; sometimes, it burns them. Also, as the source of life, the sun is responsible for the chaos of the nature world, where things happen for no rhyme or reason.

2.2.2 The Sky (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

For many religions, the sky represents heaven, where God or the gods live. The protagonist of the poem often turns the sky into a symbol of heaven. By the last stanza, though, the sky becomes just another part of nature.

- Lines 42-45: The poet imagines what the sky would look like if the earth becomes like paradise. He divides the sky into "a part of labor" and "a part of pain."
- Line 78: The poet calls the sky in heaven "perfect," which is a use of metonymy, because the perfection of the sky stands for the perfection of heaven as a whole.
- Line 97: The pagan men chant in a circle. It's as if they are transferring the life from their blood to the sky. They are responsible for turning the sky into a paradise.
- Line 117: At the end of the poem, the sky becomes a symbol of isolation, much like the image of the island earlier in the stanza. It's big, dark, and blue, and it surrounds us on all sides.

2.2.3 Birds (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

The first bird mentioned is the cockatoo, which makes the protagonist feel happy and safe. It makes her think of the majestic birds she sees in nature. Birds are a symbol of paradise and freedom – they can go wherever they want. At the end of the poem, however, she starts thinking more realistically.

- Line 3: For the woman, the green cockatoo is a symbol of freedom – but, not the freedom to go anywhere, because it is a pet bird and its wings are probably clipped. It is more a sign of luxury and leisure. She is free to enjoy this exotic little pleasure because she is not in church.
- Line 9: In these lines, the "bright, green wings" of the cockatoo seem more serious than they did before. Using a simile, the poet compares the bird to a funeral gift that ancient people bring along on a procession to visit an important tomb – in this case, the tomb of Christ. The bird is like a gift that someone brings to place on the tomb as a sacrifice to the dead.

- Line 20: The phrase "bright, green wings" is repeated to refer to the cockatoo. But, now, the colorful bird is listed as one of the "beauties" of the earth. It is a source of comfort that competes with "the thought of heaven" for her attention.
- Line 46: The woman thinks about other birds that make her happy. Unlike the cockatoo, these birds are not pets and live in nature. The imagery of the birds in the "misty fields" is a metaphor for paradise. For her, this beautiful sight represents an almost perfect happiness.
- Lines 58-60: The woman thinks her memory of birds waking up in the field, mentioned again at the end of stanza IV, is more "enduring" than any religious images of paradise. She thinks the same thing about her "desire" to see the swallow, another kind of bird with very distinctive wings, flying in the summertime. Notice that it's not the birds themselves that last or "endure," but her feelings about them.
- Lines 114-115: Unlike the birds earlier in the poem, the imagery of the quail whistling "spontaneous cries" is not compared to paradise: it's just a part of nature that lives outside the control of people.
- Lines 118-120: The poem ends on the powerful image of pigeons flying "at evening." The motions of their flight are described as "ambiguous," which means that we don't know how to interpret them. The same could be said about the whole image, especially the beautiful and mysterious last line: "Downward to darkness, on extended wings."

2.2.4 Fruit (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

The poem begins with the woman eating an orange as part of her breakfast, but, soon, just like the cockatoo, the orange becomes a symbol of sacrifice, then comfort. Most of the images of fruit in the poem involve enjoying the seasons and cycles of nature.

- Line 2: The woman is eating a late breakfast of coffee and oranges outside on a Sunday morning.
- Line 9: The smell of the orange is described as "pungent," or very strong. Using simile, the poet compares the orange to a gift that ancient people bring along on a procession to visit an important tomb – in this case, the tomb of Christ. The fruit is like a gift that someone brings to place on the tomb as a sacrifice to the dead.
- Line 20: At the end of the first stanza, the oranges are part of the procession to Christ's tomb. In this stanza, they are considered a part of nature – the "balm or beauty of the earth" – and a source of comfort that is just as powerful as thinking about heaven.
- Lines 73-75: As part of the extended metaphor comparing death to a mother (specifically, the mother of beauty), the poet says that death "causes boys to pile new plums and pears" on an old, forgotten plate. The delicious fruit causes beautiful young women to forget about all the things that death has taken away.
- Lines 77-78: The ripe fruit which never falls from the tree is a symbol of the slightly sad perfection of heaven. It's almost *too* perfect, because the fruit wants to reach the ground. The poem seems to personify the fruit by giving it desires.

- Lines 83-84: We're back to the image of boys piling fruit on a plate, like bait for the beautiful young women. But, in heaven, there would be no point in "spicing the shores," because the scent wouldn't go anywhere, and the joy of the maidens depends on the existence of change.
- Line 116: So far, we see oranges, pears, and plums. Now, we get imagery of "sweet berries." The difference between the berries and the other fruit is that they grow on their own "in the wilderness," rather than being used as food by humans. Their "sweetness" makes it that much more surprising that the berries are out of reach.

2.2.5 Water (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

The images of water are some of the most mysterious images in the poem. At one point, the protagonist dreams that she walks across the ocean to get to Palestine, but, by the end of the poem, she recognizes that she is like a person on an island, surrounded by all the strangeness of the natural world.

- Line 8: It is hard to catch, but there's a simile in lines 7 and 8. When the woman starts thinking about the death of Christ, it is likened to the way "a calm darkens among water-lights." It means, the way that day turns into evening along the coast of a big body of water, like the ocean. So, the first mention of water occurs just when the poem is getting "darker."
- Lines 11-12: The procession is described as "winding across wide water" to get to Palestine. If it is assumed that the poem takes place somewhere on the east coast of America, then "wide water" might refer to the Atlantic Ocean. In line 12, the day is compared to the "wide water" using simile. This could mean that the passage of moments in the day brings her closer to the mystery of Christ's death.
- Lines 80-82: The Rivers in heaven never reach the ocean, because there is no change in heaven – the water is there, but it's not moving. Also, the poet personifies the opposite shores of the river by suggesting that they feel a "pang," or sharp pain, because they don't touch each other. The shores are a symbol of separation.
- Line 106: In line 12, he compares the day to "wide water" using simile. "The day is like wide water. . . ." Now, he goes one step further and turns the image of the day as water into a metaphor. The woman hears a voice that comes "from" the day, as if out of nowhere – but, because Stevens has already likened the day and water, he can write, "hears upon that water without sound." The fact that both the day and the water are silent creates suspense:.
- Lines 112-113: The poet ties all the water imagery together in these lines. The "wide water" becomes an image of water around an island, a metaphor for the freedom and solitude of humanity. The water stands for everything foreign to us in nature – the things we can't understand because we're limited by our human perspective.

2.2.6 Morning and Evening (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

For the protagonist of the poem, morning is a time of hope and new beginnings. But, her joy is mixed with fear that the morning must end and give way to evening – and, not just any

evening, but Sunday evening. Sunday morning is the protagonist's last chance to relax and enjoy the beauty of nature.

- Title: The poem is set on a Sunday morning, when many Christians are normally at church.
- Line 1: Although it is morning, it is not the crack of dawn: the protagonist gets a slow start on the day, and it is already "late."
- Line 8: When the woman begins to think about the death of Christ, it is like day turning into night. The comparison between these two events is a simile.
- Line 46: The woman seems to associate mornings with happiness. She says that she is happy when she sees birds wandering in a field in the morning, before they take off for a hard day of flying.
- Lines 59-60: She can also associate happiness with the evening. She looks forward to seeing a bird called the swallow flying around in the near-darkness. There will be only enough light to see the outline of the swallow's distinctive wings.
- Line 92: The pagan men chant in the morning to celebrate the rise of the sun. In her own way, the protagonist also celebrates the sun.
- Lines 102-103: The morning is a symbol of promise and beginnings, but all beginnings must come to an end, just like morning eventually turns into evening. But, the men are united in a "heavenly fellowship" because they accept that the morning will end or "perish," and celebrate it anyway.
- Line 111: Up until now, the woman sometimes seems anxious that the morning must end and turn into evening. Here, the poet recognizes that morning and evening "depend" on one another.
- Lines 118-120: It's kind of odd that the poem ends with the imagery of darkness and evening, considering that it's called "Sunday Morning." The darkness is a symbol of death, change, and mystery, but the end of the poem doesn't take a stand on whether these are good or bad things.

2.2.7 Blood (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

There are two basic viewpoints in the poem, Christian and pagan, and the symbolism of "blood" has different meanings for each. From the Christian perspective, the "blood" can be a very serious reminder of the sacrifice that Jesus makes at his crucifixion. From the pagan perspective, blood represents human energy, creativity, and joy.

- Line 15: The blood referred to here is the blood that Christ spills at his crucifixion. It's a symbol for the sacrifice he makes by dying for the sins of mankind.
- Lines 36-40: From the pagan or nature-worshipping perspective, blood can also be a symbol of human life, energy, and imagination. The myth of Jove was created when our blood was "mingled" or mixed with "heaven." The poet wonders if the combination of human "blood" and heaven will lead to "paradise."

- Line 97: Once again, "blood" refers to pagan life or vitality, which the men send out to the sky as they sing and dance. They contain "paradise" in their blood, which is a metaphor for the joy that they feel in the morning.

2.2.8 Christianity (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

The Christian perspective in the poem is serious. It is probably more accurate to say that the poem describes a certain *kind* of Christianity, which focuses on the ideas of guilt and sacrifice rather than the sunnier things in life.

- Title: For many people, Sunday mornings carry an obligation to wake up bright and early for church. The title helps us make sense of the protagonist's feelings of guilt in the first stanza.
- Lines 5-15: Notice that many of the sections of the poem which deal with Christianity include words like "hush," "silent," and "without sound." The poet seems to think that the idea of Christian sacrifice calls for quiet, serious thoughts. The protagonist's thoughts lead her to the extended simile that "the day is like wide water," which she is supposed to "cross" to get to Palestine, where Jesus was buried.
- Lines 76-82: We can't be sure what "paradise" refers to, but it is a word that is most often used in connection with Christianity. The poet imagines paradise as a place where things never change, which he explains using the metaphor of fruit that never falls from a tree. He's not too happy about this idea.
- Lines 107-109: The woman has an epiphany, or a sudden burst of understanding, when she hears a voice from out of nowhere (which probably means from inside her head). She comes to realize that the Christ's tomb in Palestine is not a supernatural place after all, but just a place of burial.

2.2.9 Paganism (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

"Paganism" was a term used by Christians to refer to the religion that Christianity replaced: the religion of Ancient Rome and Greece, with its many gods and goddesses. The Romans especially were known for secretive rituals called "orgies," where they went out into the forest and sang, danced, drank, and, made merry until they passed out from exhaustion. Their gods were inspired by events in nature, like the winds, the ocean, and the sun and stars. For this reason, the worship of nature is often called "paganism."

Lines 31-35: Jove is the most powerful Roman god. He's the god of, among other things, lightning, thunder, and light. The poet uses a simile to compare the creation of the myth to a king who walks among his followers, waiting to be recognized.

- Lines 51-56: The poet lists a bunch of different mythical visions of paradise, including the "golden underground," which probably refers to the Greek heaven known as Elysium, which is actually under the earth.

- Lines 91-105: Stanza VII describes a pagan ritual, complete with nakedness and dancing. The pagan men are a symbol of the worship of nature.

2.2.10 Death (Sunday Morning)

Symbol Analysis

Everybody is afraid of death, but Christian scriptures claim to have "defeated" death, because Christians will live in eternal paradise when they die. The poem calls this claim into question by arguing that a paradise without death does not make much sense. Death is thought to be necessary for change to occur.

- Lines 63-74: The extended metaphor that death is the mother of beauty is one of the most important in the poem. Without death, there could be nothing fresh and new to take the place of dead things. The poem describes some of the things that death "gives birth" to.
- Line 76: The poem seems to say that change and death are the same things. In Christianity, heaven or paradise is eternal, so there is no death.
- Lines 88-90: The poem returns to the extended metaphor of death as a mother.
- Line 107: "The tomb in Palestine" refers to the place where Christ was buried and from which he was resurrected, which is a symbol of his sacrifice and redemption of humankind.

2.2.11 The Emperor (The Emperor of Ice-Cream)

Symbol Analysis

He is first mentioned in the title and is not what we expect the archetype of an emperor to be. He isn't in charge of an empire, but a “king” of Ice-cream. The poem begins with a playful sense and a hint about what we should really consider important: enjoying life and worrying less about things like conventional emperors and other such matters that are based on appearance alone.

Line 8: Not only is he an emperor, but he is also "the only emperor," which gives us reason to suspect that our speaker is making a strong statement here about this man’s power and importance.

- Line 16: Finally, we see him for the very last time in the poem within the last line. The same phrase is repeated again: "the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." Notice too that the word "emperor" is repeated twice each time we see the phrase. Again, this refrain suggests that Stevens is driving the point home with the absurd image of the "only emperor" being an "emperor of ice-cream." Here the idea is that there are no "real" emperors. They're just people like us richly dressed who pretend to be of importance. The emperor in this poem leads us to consider that if we are constantly going by appearances and playing roles, we fail to appreciate life.

2.2.12 Ice Cream (The Emperor of Ice-Cream)

Symbol Analysis

Wherever we see the emperor, we see "ice-cream." Here the image of the stuffy emperor is contrasted with the joyful image of ice-cream. Ice cream symbolizes all those happy moments we may be reminded of, when we imagine its deliciousness. This sensation of happiness is what suspends other cares of the world. It distills the essence of life into a single, focused moment. In that way, ice cream represents the true, authentic way to approach life: moment by moment.

- Line 3: As a symbol, ice cream can represent the delightfulness of life, lightheartedness, and even sensuality. Those "concupiscent curds" point to the pure enjoyment of life in a sensuous form.
- Line 8: It should be noted that "ice-cream" is the very last word in each stanza. The poem, both, begins and ends with the notion of enjoyment-in-the-moment.

  Line 16: Again, the poem ends with ice cream and all of the delicious joy it symbolizes. That focus on a pure moment of life, according to the poem, is something we should all strive to embrace.

2.2.13 The Jar (Anecdote of the Jar)

Symbol Analysis

The Jar's significance is that it is normal, average and commercial—something one could expect in any and every household. Yet, in this poem, it hss been placed into the wilderness, and in this new context, gains a whole new meaning. The jar stands up as a man-made, civilized object in a world that perpetuates itself knowing no laws. Thus, the jar has become a symbol, and is no longer just an object

Title: This title lets us know that this poem will be about a jar. It's also possibly an allusion, or reference, to the poet John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

- Line 1: This line sets up the imagery of the scene surrounding the jar. With the crucial mention of the word "I," and the state of Tennessee, it shows us that the wilderness in which we later come to see the jar is actually accessible by man, and within a state whose boundaries, certainly, were drawn by men.
- Line 2: the jar is round. And so are hills. This line makes the scene seem quite ordinary—though it is unfathomable as to why the speaker places the jar on a hill, in Tennessee.
- Line 3: This line personifies the jar, because it is taking on human characteristics. It is persuading.
- Line 7: This line shows us some internal rhyme, with "round" and "ground." It also sets the scene some more, showing that this jar was not special enough to be put on a bush, or a stump. It is just on the ground, on a hill.
- Line 8: Again, the jar is personified here. One expects a person addressed as being tall or the way he carries himself. But here we still see the jar. It can also be a port, as in a harbor—perhaps between wilderness and civilization, the man-made and the self-grown.
- Line 10: Some think the word "dominion" could be a historical reference to a type of jar that was popular in the 1920s, when this poem was written, the "Dominion Wide Mouth Special."

- Line 10: Here, we see again how it is described as any normal jar. But this normal, man-made object, has the power to distort the wilderness.
- Line 11: This line again contrasts the jar to the wilderness. The jar, obviously, cannot procreate, whereas birds and bushes have their ways of spreading without man's help. So, the jar's powers are limited after all.

2.2.14 Wilderness (Anecdote of the Jar)

Symbol Analysis

Standing apart from, yet dominated by, the jar is the wilderness. The speaker doesn't seem to think much of this wilderness, calling it "slovenly" (3), and portraying it as completely under the control of the gray bareness of the jar (6). Yet, in the end, we start to think that this wilderness, no matter how tarnished it is by the presence of the jar, is still free. Unlike the jar, the wilderness does give of bird and bush—it is wild and green. It grows and breeds.

- Line 3: It is being described as slovenly: messy, dirty, unkempt. Yet one almost wants to root for the wilderness to struggle against the jar's command.
- Line 5: Again, we see the wilderness being controlled by the jar—rising up to the hill. Here the word "rose" has a very deep meaning on both a figurative level as well as a literal level. Literally, it could be rising in elevation. Figuratively, it could be rising in status, to reach the man-made jar.
- Line 6: Though the wilderness is being described as no longer wild, the word "sprawled" still sounds wild and immense.
- Line 11: Here, the jar is being compared to two aspects of the wilderness: bird and bush. These two things are full of colors and procreation—birds breed, bushes grow. The wilderness may finally be getting back at this jar, retaining a power of its own.

2.2.15 Shapes (Anecdote of the Jar)

Symbol Analysis

The idea of roundness and shape is quite important in this poem. The wilderness, sprawling and unkempt, has no defined shape. It a sharp contrast to the jar, the shape of which is discussed in detail in the poem. So, the poem seems to highlight the differences between the unchecked wilderness and the man-made world, partly by contrasting the shapeless with the shaped.

- Line 1: At once when we think of a jar, we see the shape: an immediate sense of roundness comes into our minds.
- Line 2: Sure enough, there is confirmation that the jar is round. Not only is the jar round, but it is on a hill, another image of roundness. When we think of round, we think of a smooth, man-made edge.
- Line 3: Here, we see that the wilderness is slovenly—wild, overgrown, conforming to no shape.

- Line 7: The idea that the jar is round is repeated here. The poem almost starts to sound round, because of this repetition.
- Line 8: Not only is the jar round, but it is tall, and has a presence, and perhaps a function, letting the air come in and out of it like ships in a harbor. Thus, the word "port" has a possible metaphorical meaning. It could be comparing the jar to a port in water. In that case, though, it is a port in air.

2.2.16 Metaphysician in the Dark (On Modern Poetry)

Symbol Analysis

Stevens' metaphysician in the dark is complicated. But, at its heart, the image suggests that a modern poem is like a metaphysician—a type of spiritual philosopher who asks basic questions regarding what reality is and why human life exists.

The fact that the metaphysician-poem does its job "in the dark" suggests that modern poets need to think with their hearts instead of their eyes and ears. It also means that modern poetry has to respond to the spiritual darkness of the modern world with a message of hope.

Finally, the modern poet is in the dark because modern poetry, for Stevens, has to play out the process of searching for something. Modern poetry has to be about the human mind looking for some deeper meaning in life, which makes the image of a metaphysician wandering in the dark a pretty good one for conveying Stevens' point.

Line 20 is the only time the image appears in the poem.

2.2.17 Stage, Script, Audience, Actor (On Modern Poetry)

Symbol Analysis

The motif of poetry as a theatre is the most consistent one that Stevens uses in this poem. As early as line 3, he writes that old poetry didn't need to search for meaning the way modern poetry does, since "the scene was set" for it, and poets only "repeated what/ Was in the script" (4). In other words, poets in the past knew where to draw inspiration from..

For Stevens, though, the motif of the "theatre" allows him to talk about how things have changed for the modern world. Modern poetry has to "construct a new stage" for itself. It can't assume the world is a meaningful place anymore. It has to show how the human mind can search for and find meaning through poetry.

Continuing with the theatre motif, Stevens says that the modern poem (and poet) is like an actor who is "insatiable" (12) in his desire to perform for an audience. But it is not only the actor's job to act for the audience. The poem has to make the audience think and feel the exact same things that it is thinking. It needs to make readers take a long look at their own minds and help them find new forms of satisfaction.

- Lines 3-4: Old poets and poems did not have to think as hard as the modern poets do. Classical forms of poetry were very simple.the poets wrote sonnets about glorious lovers and the audience would accept it.

- Line 5: The shift in this poem comes when Stevens writes, "Then the theatre was changed." In other words, something happened in the modern world that has forced poets to find a new way of writing poetry.
- Line 11: When the theatre changed, Stevens says that modern poetry had to "construct a new stage for itself." In other words, it had to change its overall approach to the audience. It had to rethink everything about what it was trying to say, how it was trying to say it, and to whom it was trying to say it.
- Line 12: Modern poetry not only has to construct a new stage for itself, but also has to be "insatiable" as an actor or performer. It can never lose its appetite for making the audience feel something meaningful.
- Line 16: While modern poetry is doing its thing on the stage (or on the page), it has to speak to an "invisible audience." This invisible audience is probably the poet's reading audience. The reason they're invisible is because all of Stevens' readers aren't actually sitting in the room with him when he's writing the poem. But even before the poem reaches them, Stevens insists that the poet has to always think about his/her audience when writing.

2.2.18 Twanging Guitar (On Modern Poetry)

Symbol Analysis

Stevens says that his metaphysician is like someone just plucking a single string on a guitar. Modern poetry may not be very sophisticated because Stevens himself is writing in free verse, which would have seemed crude to poets of the past.

In lines 20-21, the modern poet or poem is like a person "Twanging/ An instrument" in the dark, sending the note out into the darkness like a ray of hope. The note is simple. It is a symbol of hope that modern poetry keeps sending out to comfort us in dark times.

The important thing for Stevens is the hope that is symbolized by a single guitar note flying off into the darkness. Poetry will always be a blunt instrument for capturing the complexity of the world. But the important thing is that poets keep striving to find something meaningful in human life.

2.2.19 Skating Man, Dancing Woman (On Modern Poetry)

Symbol Analysis

What is crucial for Stevens is that modern poetry is about "the finding of a satisfaction." It is poetry's job to make us feel good and to help us find beauty in life. But the fact is that not everybody finds skating men or dancing women appealing.

That is why Stevens says a poem should never be *just* about these things. A poem should be about the human mind's general desire to find beauty in life. Each of us could find beauty in totally different things. But modern poetry should help us realize some of the general ways to go about finding this kind of beauty. In this sense, the skating man and the dancing woman in line 27 are only examples of what some people might find beautiful.

2.2.20 "She" - The Singer (On Modern Poetry)

Symbol Analysis

The singer by the shore is a key element in the poem and functions as an extended metaphor for the artist/poet. The singer is the source of the song, just as the artist is the source of the painting, or the poet is the source of the poem. But the question that Stevens presents in the poem goes deeper than this fairly direct interpretation of the metaphor.

The singer also represents imagination—the ability to create new ideas, images, and concepts not necessarily present in the external, natural world—and our individual perceptions of reality. Her song, her art, is a projection of *her* version of reality. She is singing (expressing through her art) the sea, "word for word." And yet, what she sings does not sound like the "veritable ocean." Still, the sea loses whatever identity it has and becomes part of her song (her art).

The singer is the "single artificer" of her world. The artist is creating, in a sense, what she is inspired by

Lines 1-7: "She" is the first word of the poem and "sang" is the second, so one instantly deciphers that these elements are going to be significant. "She" is introduced as a singer, someone creating something. It is important to note that Stevens does not say the she sang the sea, or like the sea, or about the sea. She sang "beyond" the sea. What she sang was something more than the sea itself and not just the sea, the very essence of the sea itself, the spirit ("genius") of the sea.

- Line 8: If we are reading "She" as an extended metaphor for the poet-artist, then this line takes on even more significance. She is not a mask. The artist, the poet is not hiding or concealing anything in their work. The artist is not presenting a fiction but rather the truth, the reality, their reality. This connects appropriately with Stevens' idea of reality and perception.
- Lines 10-14: The artist is recording what they hear, see, smell, taste, touch—recording what they experience exactly (word for word). But what they create becomes something "other." It is the product of the artist (in this case the song) that we experience.
- Lines 15-20: The artist is the maker of the art. But the inspiration, the sea, has become insignificant, nothing more than a place she is walking while she sings. Earlier Stevens told us that she was singing exactly what she heard and recording it word for word. But the inspiration is filtered through the artist and becomes something entirely different, so that the connection to the inspiration is no longer significant. She, the artist, has turned the sea into something entirely "of" herself.
- Lines 36-43: The artist captures the emotion of the inspiration, the "solitude." But she does more than record the world, she creates it. She is "the maker." Stevens portrays the poet-artist as almost god-like, with the power to create the world itself.

2.2.21 The Song (The Idea of Order at Key West)

Symbol Analysis

References to the "song" in "The Idea of Order at Key West" function as an extended metaphor for art itself: the actual product of the artist and the inspiration. While the "song"

represents just about any creative product, it is no accident that the term "song" is probably most logically associated with a poem. Stevens wanted this connection to be clear.

The song is also set in juxtaposition to another recurring image: the sea/water, which represents, among other things, inspiration or the muse. While reading "The Idea of Order…" if one substitutes *poem* or *painting* for *song* one would understand that Stevens is speaking about art and not *just* poetry.

- Line 9: A work of art and its inspiration are two separate things. Once the piece of art has been created, it operates independently of its inspiration.
- Line 15: The inspiration, the muse, does not make the art, the artist does.
- Lines 38-40: The Sea became the sea she created with her art. The artist here has made something new, a new reality to be responded to, reacted to, and inspired by. It becomes a *new* muse. It is this inspiration that colors the speaker's perception of the sea and the lights after the singing stops.

2.2.22 The Sea (The Idea of Order at Key West)

Symbol Analysis

In this poem, the sea represents the external world and is juxtaposed throughout the poem with the singer and the. The singer represents the internal elements of creativity and imagination, the artist-poet.

Also, the sea functions as an extended metaphor for the artist's inspiration or muse (something *external* that inspires the imagination) and also for the natural world and reality. So, at one end we have the artist and the work of art. At the other end we have the muse, the inspiration.

The speaker's perception of the sea, of the natural world, of reality itself, becomes shaped (ordered) by the song, or art. The artist's internal perception (imagination) and external representation of the sea and of reality (the song) influence the *speaker's* perception of reality. He begins to see *her* sea, to experience the world through the artist's representation.

What we ultimately have is a kind of unclearly marked division ("ghost[ly] demarcations") between the sea (natural world-inspiration-muse) and the singer (artist-art-imagination). Things seem to be separated, but then morph together and separate again, similar to the way Stevens' lines seem to fold in on themselves so that it is sometimes unclear what the subject of the line is (is it the *sea*, or the *song*, or *she*?).

- Lines 1-7: Steven's introduces this idea of the sea as inspiration in the very first line of the poem by using the word "genius" and referring to the spirit of something, much like the Greek idea of the muse as a spirit or goddess that brings inspiration to a poet or artist. Stevens also introduces the idea of the sea as merely a part of the natural world in this first stanza.

The movement of the sea, the "mimic motion," makes a sound. But it also "caused constantly a cry." The ambiguity of this stanza's syntax makes it plausible that the cry that the sea

"caused" is coming from someplace other than the sea.
The sea makes a sound, but also inspires the singer to make her own sound, acting as a kind of muse to the singer.

- Lines 8-14: In the beginning of stanza 2, Stevens reinforces the idea that the sea is the sea: a clear, concrete representation of the natural world. Here it's a symbol of reality. It is not trying to be something else (no masks). The sea is just the sea.
  The sound of the sea and the sound of the song are not mixed. They are separate elements. The sea is the external sound, separate and wholly different from the song (the outward manifestation of the *internal* imagination).
  "What she sang was what she heard." Here, she is interpreting the sound of the sea. Unfortunately, Stevens does not let this sense of clarity continue for long. In the end, it isn't going to be as simple as the sea inspires the song.)
- Lines 16-17: The sea is presented again as simply the sea. Stevens is still working that extended metaphor, the sea representing the natural world/reality. In these lines he emphasizes that the sea is a place, a location. No more, no less.
  Also, Stevens is making a distinction between the inspiration (the sea) and the song. The inspiration is not the art. It is merely the external reality. The art comes from the maker.
  Lines 21-33: The sound of the sea is not enough to explain the song; it is "meaningless." The reality, the external world, is "sound alone."
  Going back to the extended metaphor, if the sound of the sea lacks meaning, then it follows that reality, the natural world on its own, lacks meaning.
  If the singer was simply mimicking the sound of the sea, of reality, the song would have been meaningless. But the song was "more than" the sound alone.
  Therefore, reality on its own has no meaning. It takes the artist to comprehend, to complete, the natural world.
- Lines 38-43: When the singer sings, the sea, the natural world/reality, becomes that which she creates. She creates the world-reality through her song. She gives meaning, *order*, to the natural world through her song.
  The sea, the external, natural world (reality) is created, made, by her. The world is incomplete without the internal world of the human mind and imagination.
- Line 49: Even after the song ends, the speaker's perception of the sea, of reality, has changed. The sea is portioned, visually divided into "zones." Art (internal perception) has affected the speaker's perception of the sea, the external world, reality.
- Line 53: The "maker" (the singer-artist-poet) intensely wants to express the sea—the natural world, reality—in order to give meaning and order to the universe. Here Stevens is trying to say that the sea has words, but without the poet the words are unintelligible.

  The natural world relies on the poet-artist to give it intelligible meaning. The external is a product of the internal. The sea relies on the singer to provide meaning, order, for its words.

3. Summary and Analysis of the following Poems

3.1 Sunday Morning

Sunday Morning is a meditative poem in which Stevens presents a woman who is frightened by the thought of death when she hears the church bells. The poet initially appreciates the woman's rational thoughts as she refuses to accept the romantic fancies of the Christian afterlife and wants to make her life on this earth itself meaningful.

But when the woman, however, seeks some kind of "imperishable bliss", the poet turns against her and begins to criticize her complacency. In the criticism of the woman, we are also criticized because most of us are like her in that we fail to live up to our reasonable thoughts and philosophies and fall back to the same traps of fantastic ideas given by our religions or myths. In the first four stanzas, we see the woman rejoicing life, nature and its beauty: she explicitly rejects the dogmas of religion, and embraces the concrete reality and beauty of the world and life. The poet suddenly interrupts this strain of the woman's meditation and begins to expound an opposite philosophy about the "beauty of death"! Stevens has shown what place death has in being. In one sense, the poem is an argument with a woman who, on one Sunday Morning, is prompted to think of Christ's sacrificial death and of the heaven, which Christ opened to man by dying for him... The poet mocks heaven and the attempt to abstract life from being and leave death behind. Because life is such a good thing, death, upon which life depends, must also be a good thing for Stevens. The poem begins with an almost vague description of an aristocratic woman sitting in her garden on a Sunday morning and being happy for all the luxuries and happiness of life. In the first stanza, we see that the complacencies of the rich life and the natural beauty of her surrounding dissipate "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice". She dreams a little and she feels the interference of death in the process of life; but she finds the bright colors of beautiful things draw her attention again. Though they all look, as if they are in a procession of death, there are overtones of rejoice for the beauty of life and nature. The poet's mediation on life, death, and change is presented through this description of the woman who prefers the world of the senses to "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice" associated with religious practice, but who is found later that she is not really sure that these can be satisfied with temporary delights. In an imagined paradise, there is "no change of death", but only rivers that never reach the sea, ripe fruit never falls from trees; the images associated with religion and dreams of an afterlife are sinister and lifeless. In some places, he deliberately uses archaic words and phrases to suggest that religious belief is out of date. Stevens's life- long conviction is that "poetry and poets must take the place of religion and priests to provide form and meaning for human life" which is implicit in the poem Sunday Morning. The most important of the major theme of Stevens is the idea that human perception of beauty requires the realization that everything on earth is temporary. Everyone will die and everything will change; so we must recognize permanence as an illusion. What is permanent is the changing cycle of life and death. Christianity, Hinduism, or any religion promising permanence, is false because it envisions a paradise that is something like our earth but without the inherent changes in earth's life and circumstance. They are wish-words created without properly thinking whether they would be possible or even desirable! In fact, this physical world, an endless round of birth, death and the seasons, is more lasting than any interpretation of it. Religion, myths, philosophies, and

cultures are all fictions and pass away. To discover that there never has been any celestial world is a joyful liberation and the man says himself: "this happy creature-it is he that invented the Gods". Every passage in the poem is charged with the sense that one can experience beauty, can love a thing or person, only if he at the same time experiences the painful sense that the loss of that thing or person is inevitable, that its mortality is a quality immanent in its living presence. The third stanza contrasts the pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world (represented by Jove) with the more democratic Christian religion. The fourth stanza is a sweet but sad farewell to both the old pagan religions and Christianity; these are gone forever. In the fifth stanza, the thought of death again intrudes. She is now afraid of it; she is tempted by an everlasting 'bliss' for her individual self. At this point, the woman is suddenly revealed as the common type of individual after all! She says that she needs an everlasting bliss. The poet reacts to her 'common falling back into the same trap' by saying that "Death is the mother of beauty!" The desire of beauty is quickened by the sense of death. Beauty and Death were looked upon as sisters by the Romantics. Here too, death is personified as a mother who gives life to everything in the nature, and even to the understanding of life and reality. In the sixth stanza, the poet begins to meditate about the nature of the place called heaven: "Is there no change of death in paradise? Does ripe fruit never fall?" If rivers flow but never reach the ocean, if fruits become ripe but never fall, if things are born but never die, if there is only 'bliss' and no contrary to give it any meaning, then such a heaven is not a desirable place. It must be impossible, and even if it actually existed, it would not be desirable, interesting or worthwhile to seek for it. Religions have construed a vision of a paradise similar to the earthly paradise but unchanging and eternal. Such a paradise would become tiresome and produce the greatest sin of all, ennui/boredom! The seventh stanza describes the religion of the future, a new paganism in which men will worship the physical universe. They will believe in the brotherhood of man and they will be aware that the lives of all men are temporary. The final stanza states that Jesus (God) is dead and that man must live alone, on a transitory but lovely planet. The woman's recognition that Jesus is a historical figure and that she is alone, only as a part of "unsponsored" nature, frees her from the prison in which her traditional beliefs had locked her. The conclusion, which is a merging of the woman's perception with that of the other voice, is a picture of the sweet earth and a statement of the Everyman's need to recognize it and come to terms with the inevitable reality of death, that gives real meaning of life

3.2 The Emperor of Ice Cream

The Emperor of Ice-Cream is the most popular poem of Wallace Stevens. Stevens "plots" this story into two equal stanzas: one for the kitchen where the ice cream is being made, and another for the bedroom where the corpse awaits decent covering. He "plots" it further by structuring the poem as a series of commands from an unknown master of ceremonies, directing-in a diction f extreme oddness-the neighbors in their funeral duties.

Both the symbolic kitchen stanza and the symbolic bedroom stanza end with the same third-order refrain echoed by the title. "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." The title, in simple words, means something like this: since life is like ice-cream, the ruling standard of life and its reality is the emperor of that fact itself; therefore, enjoy life as you'd enjoy ice-cream itself. The title reflects that human beings are no more resistant to death than ice cream

is to the sun. The poet speaks in the voice of a man (the poet's spokesman), addressing the neighbors to carry out the funeral in certain ways. It is common in some communities to satisfy the dead in this way, with food and drink, after a time of mourning. This is common in tribal communities; and it is suggested that Stevens has based the poem on his experience of Canadian tribes, or maybe on some Red Indian American tribe. The poem begins with the neighbor's confident command to the other people; he is giving instructions as to how to conduct the funeral (waking). In the first stanza, the man calls for a person muscular enough to whip up desserts by hand; perhaps there is not enough money for an expensive mixer. People must eat and drink when they arrive the poor woman's house to attend her 'wake' and funeral. This implies that we need not grieve and fast and torture the living when one who has died. The desserts will have to be served in kitchen cups; there is no fine china or crystal. The common people who will attend will come in their everyday clothes, rather than formal attire; the flowers will be brought in last month's newspapers, rather than in vases, or as garlands. All these details suggest that there is nothing fanciful, nothing romantic, or nothing special about death and its aftermath; indeed, death is too ordinary and natural to be shocking. Stevens avoids the euphemisms and denials that often accompany the details and descriptions of death. From the second stanza, the poem continues with the preparations. The man asks someone to take a sheet from the top of a broker dresser to cover the dead woman's face; even if that means that her ugly feet will protrude from the too short covering. Instead of lighting soft and dim candles, the bright light should be turned to glare on her body, to show that she is now cold and silent in death. Stevens is insisting that one must look directly at death, in all its mater-of- factness, and see it not as a state of some mystical or spiritual transformation, but rather as actual fact to be faced and dealt with. To romanticize death is to invite more grief than less. The wake (ceremony) takes place in the woman's own house, rather than in a church; and the preparation are inexpensive and minimal, including making the food in her own kitchen; this reflects Stevens's insistence that death should not be romanticized, idealized, or sentimentalized. Perhaps if death will inevitably melt everyone away to nothing, no matter how tasty or delicious they may be while alive, in terms of the ice-cream metaphor. So, in the classic tradition of carpe diem, one should seize the day while one is able to do so. The central image in "The Emperor or Ice-Cream" is complex, ambiguous and ambivalent. The emperor of ice-cream is further specified as the only "emperor". Death is, as everyone present can see, the end of life, a natural and inevitable thing. The poem ends by repeating this statement: "the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"; with the title and the two refrains, the enigmatic-looking statement is repeated three times, for emphasis, in the poem. These are two possible interpretations of the ice cream: one that the emperor is life, the other that he is dead. Ice cream is tasty, transitory, and cold: life may be tasty and perishable, but is not cold. The quality of coldness may suit death, for it is cold but scarcely transitory, unless we assume than Stevens believes in an afterlife, which he doesn't. This mixture and complication of the implications in the meaning of the image of ice-cream seems to suggest that life and death are inextricable bound and blended together. Whoever the emperor is, he is more real than the run-of-the-mill emperors. Ice cream is both death and life.

3.3 Anecdote of the Jar

Anecdote of the Jar is an imagist poem in which Stevens explores the question of the superiority between art and nature: Is nature superior to human creations, or does human creativity surpasses nature in some way? This is an age-old and puzzling question. This poem solves the riddle by recognizing the unique differences between art and nature: art may sometimes be more beautiful than nature but it cannot be as creative as the nature.

The poem begins by telling us of an incident in the past. Once he kept a big and beautiful jar upon an untidy hill in Tennessee. It was a beautiful round jar, reminding one of the Grecian urns of Keats. We are asked to imagine a kind of enormous hand placing a round jar on a hill. The jar is an art object made by a human being, whereas the hill on which it is placed is natural. This contrast becomes more striking as the poem develops. The persona of the poem tells us that the man made jar caused the wilderness to surround the hill, or that the hill looked more untidy in contrast to the jar. In the second quatrain, the "slovenly" and wild nature rises up to the artistic jar, which we now understand as a symbol of the human imagination. But rather than overtake the jar, as we might expect natural brush would in reality, the jar/imagination tames or controls the wilderness. Perhaps Stevens is arguing briefly here that the imagination, culture and art might be more powerful than any natural reality. But the poem abruptly takes a turn in its form, and another turn in content follows. The jar domineers "everywhere". This is a striking expression of the power of the imagination over reality. But we are soon to see the other side of the reality. In the third stanza, the poem takes the other turn, in its content. Here, the persona shifts from the lofty images that described the majestic jar (or imagination) to a different description using words like "gray" and "bare object", which cannot give birth and re-create the fertile lushness like that of the "slovenly wilderness" described in the first stanza. It is beautiful, but ultimately does not have the power of creation of the nature/ reality represented by the wilderness. The poet is demonstrating the acceptance of the limits of imagination in reality. Steven's central concern in his poetry is the treatment of the "problem" of reality versus imagination. "Anecdote of the Jar" is an example that expresses an acceptance of the limits of the imagination; this is also Stevens's theory of poetry. The jar, as a symbol of the imagination, is not fertile, and it cannot recycle itself or reproduce, though it may, in imagination, be richer than the nature. Both have their uniqueness, and yet we feel that the poet is more or less on the side of the nature's diverse, creative and limitless powers of creation. The confident persona, who seems to have egoistically placed a jar to challenge the nature, realizes at last that his art is not capable of what the nature is.

3.4 Gray Room

In his poem “Gray Room”, Wallace Stevens is portraying the feelings of a bored girl who is sitting in a room, the color of which is described as grey. The color of the room is said to be grey because of the reason that the room depicts the feelings of the girl which are neither black nor white. The girl is depressed with her life.

The poet says “ I know how furiously your heart is beating” which means the poet can easily understand the turmoil which is going on in the heart of the girl, though from outside she is showing that she is all right. The poet is depicting his own imagination and his own art in this

poem. He wants the readers to sympathize with the girl who has everything she wants in her life but is still not happy. The poet also points out the fact that happiness is not found in larger things in life, it is as a matter of fact found in smaller things.

Some people fail to realize this fact as a result of which their hearts are neither black nor white, they are somewhere in between- grey. Their hearts are grey colored. The poet actually gives color to the feeling of boredom that is witnessed by many girls today. They have everything in life that they wish for but still in the race of life, they forget to admire the little things in life as a result of which they end up being frustrated.

The girl is a character of fiction created by the poet and he also insists the readers to enter into the mold of this character created by him. When the poet says “What is all this?” he means that despite the character has created such life for herself, but she is left with the question as to what all this is which clearly means that she is not at all happy with her life. He also insists on the fact that at least a few things in life can be known for certain. For example we are sure of the fact that our heart pounds day and night till the moment we are alive.

The woman is standing in a pale gown and she stare in the room, looks at the fan; she is actually clueless about her surroundings because of the pain in her heart which refuses to go away. This is in fact the situation of the hearts of all the women who fail to find happiness in small things in life and run after larger things, the things which they are not satisfied with once they attain them. There lies a deep meaning in the poem which the poet is keen on conveying to his readers. Finding happiness in smaller things in life will help in life being colorful and the shades of grey will eventually disappear.

3.5 On Modern Poetry

There is something to be said for a man who can look deeply into his profession and define exactly what is that he does. The deaths of many men have passed without a definition of their lives, or a true understanding of what they do. In his poem "On Modern Poetry," Wallace Stevens attempts to define his life's work and his passion. To a poet "On Modern Poetry" serves as both a guidebook and a wonderful example of what makes poetics an amazing art. Stevens uses his talent to explain his talent, taking the reader on a wonderful journey through the process of poem creation, and through the human mind. The aforementioned guidelines that Wallace details in "On Modern Poetry" are dead on and may have shaped the way that poems are created to this day. He captured the true essence of poetics while allowing the reader to continue doing their job, using their mind and their imagination.

Stevens weaves a visual path through the job description of a poem and leaves the reader wondering what is said, and how to take it.

The journey of poem writing is a perplexing one, especially in the area of method. When Wallace Stevens opens "On Modern Poetry" with the line: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice" (ll. 1-2). He is detailing the struggle to find the right word, the

right scheme, or the right time for change. He then follows with: "It has not always had/To find: the scene was set; it repeated what/Was in the script" (ll. 2-4). This is in reference to change and the modernist/imagist view of poetry in the past. This could be taken as a derogatory comment to the simplicity and complacency of past poetry. Regardless, I tend to take it as a comment on the overall state of poetry, a look at the past, but a welcoming of the state of current poetry. The first stanza of the poem simply details the struggles of a changing genre, and uses descriptive diction to do that.

One great thing about a poem is that it leaves room for thought, for personal development, and for individual interpretation. Not only does "On Modern Poetry" do those things, but it also tells the reader to do them. "A metaphysician in the dark, twanging/An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives/Sounds passing through a sudden rightnesses, wholly/Containing the mind..." (ll. 20-23). The lines in themselves are perplexing and leave plenty of room for interpretation. But what a reader comes to conclude is that Stevens is suggesting that a poem buries itself within the human mind and plants a seed. The poem acts as a seed to thought, and it exercises the mind on a regular basis. A good poem is one that makes the reader think, and not just about the words, but about themselves and about their mind.

The idea of a poem as a performer, be it an actor in a play, or a musician playing an instrument, or a metaphysician playing an instrument is one of particular interest. Stevens uses the metaphor throughout the poem and does so quite well. The duality of the performer as the poet allows for a wide range of comparison and gives way to a multitude of metaphors. In the following lines Stevens uses the idea of a actor on stage to present the depth of a poems words:

"...speak words that in the ear,

In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,

Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound

Of which, and invisible audience listens,

Not to the play, but to itself, expressed

In an emotion as of two people, as of two

Emotions becoming one..." (ll. 13-19).

The lines represent the idea that a poem must cross over from reality to a level that talks to the reader and allows them to listen to their thoughts and not just the poem. The poem becomes simply a vehicle for the human mind; it opens doors and allows the reader to read about themselves.

When Stevens enters the second stanza he begins to give his guidelines for modern poetry:

"It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

It has to face the men of the time and to meet

The women of the time. It has to think about war

And it has to find what will suffice" (ll. 7-10).

The lines in themselves are quite simple, in their original form. They provide simple rules, but rules that were fairly modern during this time. The idea of including the meeting of women provides a fairly modern concept in concern to women's rights and public recognition. Poems have always been concerned with war, or with human suffering, but the modern idea of thinking of war provides an example of being both positive and tragic. The past hundred years had been fairly rose-colored, but beginning in the 1930's America took a turn for the worse and thus provided a reason to consider human tragedy. For a poem to be living and to learn the speech of the place simply means it must me modern, or current.

The final four lines are more intriguing and seem more complex than all of the previous lines. They seem to be putting into action the ideas of the poem so far. He gives examples of what things would work as "modern poetry". Modern poetry must find satisfaction, and some ways in which that may be achieved is through the discussion of a man skating or of a woman dancing or combing her hair. These things must exercise the mind though. Modern poems cannot simply describe the action, but must look beyond the action, from the subject, to the writer, to the reader.

While I cannot claim to fully understand Stevens' view of modern poetry, I feel that through his poem I can form some conclusions about his beliefs. Wallace Stevens was not a highly renowned scholar, but he did have an understanding of what he was writing. He could describe his work, and he could put it on paper for others to see. As a student now finally gaining a respect for poetry it is nice to see what a poem writer thinks about his job. It is amazing to see that a poem can be made of any topic, and maybe that provides another point in the description of poetry. In a 28-line poem Wallace succeeds in providing a guidebook in the writing of good poetry, and gives the reader a lot to think about.

3.6 Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird

The poem seems to be thematically structured to bring about a fuller understanding of our own thought processes and to enable us to realize shortcomings in our egocentric thoughts. By using the signifier blackbird, repeated in each of the thirteen stanzas, Stevens guides us through a process of self questioning.

The first stanza may be read as an introduction to the entire poem and a preparatory exercise for your intellect. Stevens conjures an image of a lone blackbird among twenty snow capped

mountains, the only moving thing is the eye of the bird. If we consider the Blackbird as signifying the intellect, this suggests to me a feeling of omnipresence, of power and isolation, as many intellectually minded people may feel.

In the second stanza, we are asked to consider three blackbirds being as three minds within a tree. This seems strongly to suggest a trinity of the conscious mind, perhaps such as Freud suggested, the id, ego and superego. Adopting this reading, we may go further on to say that the tree represents the framework of our mind, i.e., the physical body, our brain, perhaps even knowledge. Then, the blackbird signifies singular thoughts on a particular subject.

The third sketch is more subversive than the first two. We are provided with an image of a blackbird being "whirled in the autumn winds", suggesting to me a loss of control, an overwhelming force acting on the blackbird. Not only that, the blackbird is said to be "a small part of the pantomime" suggestive of the Taoist notion of the ‘dance of life', the interplay of all living things, the blackbird is a microscopic example of all of life. I have therefore read this sketch to illustrate the role a thought plays in the mind as the role a blackbird plays in the cycle of life.

A more concrete example of the style of thought Stevens wishes us to explore are in the fourth stanza. It is styled on a fundamental Taoist principle that "all things under heaven are born of the corporeal: The corporeal is born of the Incorporeal" (Tao Te Ching, chap.40, Shambala 1990). The incorporeal the Tao Te Ching speaks of is the universal unconscious, the base spiritual kinship we have to each other, and indeed, to every object in the universe. Therefore a man and a woman at base are the same if we add a blackbird; they are all a part of the ‘oneness'.

Stevens in the fifth stanza seems to be alluding to the importance of grasping the difference between what is implicit and what is implied. Other words to describe these phenomena could be signifier and signified. The ‘inflections' of the Blackbird whistling I took to illustrate the signifying sign (be it whistling, text, speech, etc.). Similarly, the signifier implies the ‘innuendo', or the signified. We must consider this from the very beginning of Stevens' own poem, with the title. Blackbirds will give every reader a different picture in their mind, but if one takes into account what the word Blackbird actually signifies as a sign within the structure of the piece, we have an altogether different appreciation of the work.

The complexity of the ideas and language in the sixth stanza lends a baffling air to the verse. However since Stevens has urged us in the last stanza to read deeper within the text in order to draw out the meanings, we are prepared for it. The first two lines "Icicles fill[ed] the long window with barbaric glass" is a very visual line, with images of looking out of an ice encrusted window, but it brings too the feeling of entrapment or encroachment. Then the "shadow of the blackbird" crosses the window, drawing our attention from the window to the flitting shadow where we are told "The mood traced in the shadow . . . an indecipherable cause.". The appearance of the shadow seems to provoke in the author a sudden flash of

intuition, which unfortunately turns out to be ungraspable or indecipherable to himself and to the reader also.

Again I felt confronted by another Taoist interpretation while reading verse seven. Why would you reach for loftier heights that are impossible to attain when everything you need is at your feet? Stevens counsels the "thin men of Haddam" to "see how the blackbird walks around the feet of the women about you." According to the Tao Te Ching, we should "Know the masculine, keep to the feminine." (Shambala, 1990). Apparently, in both sources, the woman (female tendencies) is equated with being down to earth, wiser than those foolish men (masculine tendencies) becoming thinner while pining for golden birds and ignoring the blackbirds.

Here Stevens speaks of written or spoken texts, saying "I know noble accents and lucid inescapable rhythms." This at first seems to be very egotistical, telling the reader that he has extraordinary skills. Then, he admits that " . . . the blackbird is involved in what I know.". I draw two conclusions from this admission: that he hails the blackbird as an equal or even an influence to his writing, that this sentence is a tribute to the blackbird (nature). Also, that all of his rhythms and accents are easily traced back to a natural (not man made) source, for instance, the whistling of the blackbird has rhythms and accents, just as poetry has, therefore Stevens is not doing anything new, the blackbird does it all already.

On the surface of stanza nine, it seems that Stevens is referring to the horizon, or man's own line of sight, with which we may trace a circle from and point with us as the focal point. I believe what is signified is especially present in the final line " . . . one of many circles", what are these circles? I was reminded of the circle in nature and in life, everything revolves in a circular fashion, the planet, the food chain, life and death.

Verses ten and eleven introduce the concept of fear and guilt into our thoughts. "At the sight of blackbirds flying in a green light" can only suggest to me the idea of something being wrong with the light that the blackbirds are flying in, which I believe would signify the carrier of the thoughts (blackbirds). Therefore I take it also to mean that when something is amiss within ones thoughts, even those who are devout followers of mellifluence may exclaim sharply, or simply be affected adversely by the disquieting effect the blackbirds have in that light.

The theme of guilt is apparent in verse eleven, when we are told that a man riding "In a glass coach" which would suggest extreme fragility, coupled with an illusion of transparency, which are two things a guilty person may feel. Also, we are told that "Once, a fear pierced him, in that he mistook the shadow of his equipage for blackbirds." who but a guilty and fearful man would be pierced by fear at an illusion of blackbirds. Blackbirds in this case could mean many things, for example, the law, a party bent on revenge, an ex-wife/girlfriend, etc. The blackbirds I also take to symbolize his externalized guilt, projected into an illusion glimpsed below.

The aphorism "The river is moving ... the blackbird must be flying" is a common form in philosophical texts. The cause and effect principal; if the water flows, nature lives, the blackbird flies. In the context of nature, it speaks of the immutability of all, the resistance to change working hand in hand with the process of change. In reading this to describe humans, it is essentially the same. The water symbolizes life, the blackbird intellect or consciousness, as long as we live, our intellect flies. This is a natural segue to the last verse, having both the effect of calming our fears and restoring our faith in life.

The final verse in my reading deals with aging and death even. "It was evening all afternoon." suggests a person in his declining years, death being night, evening nearing night. "It was snowing, and it was going to snow." suggests the foresight of experienced eyes; someone who has seen many winters and has been granted a limited prescience over the effects of nature. For the first time in the piece, the blackbird we see is immobile, sitting in the cedar limbs. Going back to the second stanza, and the idea of a tree as our physical body, with blackbirds representing our intellect or thoughts, we see the slowing down and eventual stopping of creative thought as night comes nearer.

Wallace Stevens is a man deeply involved with philosophical problems as they relate to man and his universe. He seems to be asking us to open our minds to the magic of everyday life, ie; the blackbird and nature, but also to reevaluate our mindset in relation to living in an ordinary, mundane world. I believe he is attempting to counsel us in using an open mind and creative visualisation in order to bring about a conscious bond between the causal and seemingly acausal relationships enjoyed by every object and living being involved in the dance of life.

3.7 Idea of Order at Key West

The narrator and his friend watch as a woman “sang beyond the genius of the sea.” As she sings, the narrator compares her voice to that of the ocean; though the woman mimicked the ocean, “it was she and not the sea we heard.” While he ponders over this observation, the woman eventually leaves. Her singing left a strong impression on him: as he and friend turn towards the town, he sees the world differently

Structurally, the poem is mostly written in blank verse. It is separated into five stanzas of various lengths. In the first stanza, the narrator observes how a woman sings the sounds she heard from the ocean. Though the woman "sang what she heard," the song and the ocean remain divided: the separation between the natural, inhuman and "veritable" ocean was too great for the woman's song to bridge. Despite the un-"medleyed sound," the men hear the woman over the ocean "for she was the maker of the song she sang." A central question of the poem ends the stanza inquiring whose "spirit" the men heard.

In the second stanza, the narrator wonders at a world with "only the dark voice of the sea." The lack of other life leaves the natural world of the ocean barren and empty. He begins to

see that there was "more" to the world than "her voice, and ours, among / The meaningless plungings of water and the wind."

In the third stanza, the structure of the poem changes slightly with an indentation of the first line, putting emphasis on the woman's voice. The narrator believes the woman to be "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang." Because she sang the sounds of the sea, both the ocean and she are now connected as creation and "maker".

In the fourth stanza, the narrator addresses his friend Ramon Fernandez when the woman stops her singing.[Note 1] The two of them turn from the scene of the woman and the ocean towards the town instead. As the narrator watches the town, he is struck by how the lights "mastered the night and portioned out the sea."

In the final stanza, he cries out at the "maker's rage to order words of the sea" and how the "rage for order" connects to themselves and their origins.

Similar to many of his other poems, "The Idea of Order at Key West" is philosophically complex. Stated by critics as “perhaps impossible to interpret fully,” the poem “affirms a transcendental poetic spirit yet cannot locate it.” [4] One critic has deemed the poem as "desperately" ambiguous, containing unresolvable difficulties.[5] The ambiguity of ideas did not reflect Stevens’ confusion or unease with ideas, but rather fostered interpretation by suggesting that the idea of order could not be raised without “the specter of disorder.”[6]The deconstruction of people and nature allows for an artistic interpretation of the poem.[7]

The core of the poem lies on the interdependence of imagination and reality. Stevens stresses the “essential discontinuity between them” and emphasizes their differences by "demonstrating the vain struggle of the imagination 'to grasp what it beholds in a single version of it."[8][9] This interpretation is remarkable because in the same collection of poems, *Ideas of Order,* Stevens "interrogates this ordering imagination with skepticism" yet celebrates it in "The Idea of Order at Key West".[10]

Though the majority of the poem focuses on the woman singer and the song, the narrator and his friend also participate in the creation of art: through his narration itself and through its effects on him which transforms his perception of reality. The narrator uses the woman's song to help himself reconstruct a world of his own reality from the chaos of the "water [that] never formed to mind or voice.”

3.8 A High-Toned Old Christian Woman

The poem High Toned Old Christian Woman is a humorous and playful poem. It is mainly a defense of poetry. The speaker is a writer of love poems and he is talking to a devout Christian woman who seems to have repudiated poetry. He argues that poetry is a supreme fiction or art.

It can be the medium of expressing moral and religious themes. Moreover, it can perform amazing feats of imagination, and it can please the religious people, serious widow and everyone alike. The poem is difficult to paraphrase because the poet deliberately uses unusual

metaphors and expressions. Many of the ideas can only be guessed out from the basic situation. The poet first claims the supremacy of poetry, adding that the religious woman can take it and make a platform of the church: he probably means that she can make it religious in subject and theme if she likes. Poetry need not be vulgar or be only about love and sex. Poetry can be transformed into an object of spiritual importance. So, in principle, poetry can be spiritual and therefore there need not be any disagreement between a poet and a nun. After justifying that poetry can be moral. The poet begins to talk to the nun in a more kidding manner. He says that his metaphysical and imaginative poetry can be 'amoral'. It can create a decoration outside the church and devise funny dramas even in heaven. The poet's vulgarity may not be purified by verses on the tomb. But that joy will be real and concrete. The entertainment of such poetry accepts physical forms and twisted themes. It can convert the abstract into concrete. At the end of the poem, the speaker addresses the old Christian woman again and says that in the real world even her orthodox priest and people may enjoy poetry. They may ring their bells and sing in poetry if they wish. Even those who go to penance and torture themselves do enjoy the pleasure of poetry. Those people may be proud of the spiritual, but they also have big bellies as they are physical beings. Not only they, but even widows are aroused by poetry. Poetry is imaginative and free to express. Poetry provokes pleasure in anyone including priests, nuns and widows. Poetry will wink and make widows show expressions of pain. But Stevens's philosophy was that "poetry rescues human beings from the tragic situation of life by the use of imagination". The main idea of supremacy of poetic imagination is something like Keats's ideas of imagination. For Stevens, imagination can discover the beauty and joy in the face of suffering and death. The poem is disorderly as life is, but one idea is certain: the supreme imagination of poetry makes life more bearable. Like a typical modern American poem, this poem is in a colloquial type of language. It is in free verse. It is like a metaphysical poem in its unusual metaphors, far-fetched ideas and dramatic situation. But the logic is unusually obscure. The speaker is excited as he talks about the powers of poetry. His ideas are like lovers' fantasy. The theme of the poem, then, is the supremacy of poetry as a means of expression and pleasure, and even as a means of sublime experience. There is no wrong with poetry itself. Rather, poetry is something that the religious as well as the atheistic have been using to gain their own kinds of heaven: one will gain the heaven of faith and the other will create the heaven of imagination.

4. Wallace Stevens' Contribution to American Literature

Wallace Stevens is one of America's most respected poets. He was a master stylist, employing an extraordinary vocabulary and a rigorous precision in crafting his poems. But he was also a philosopher of aesthetics, deeply exploring the notion of poetry as the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality. Because of the extreme technical and thematic complexity of his work, Stevens was sometimes considered a willfully difficult poet. But he was also acknowledged as an eminent abstractionist and a provocative thinker, and that reputation has continued since his death. In 1975, for instance, noted literary critic Harold Bloom, whose writings on Stevens include the imposing *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate,* called him "the best and most representative American poet of our time."

In 1914 he published two poems in the modest periodical *Trend,* and later that year he produced four more verses for Harriet Monroe's publication, *Poetry.* None of these poems were included in Stevens's later volumes, but they are often considered his first mature writings.

In 1915 he produced his first important poems, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning," and in 1916 he published his prize-winning play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise.* Another play, *Carlos among the Candles,* followed in 1917, and the comic poem "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" appeared in 1918. During the next few years Stevens began organizing his poems for publication in a single volume. For inclusion in that prospective volume he also produced several longer poems, including the masterful "Comedian as the Letter C." This poem, together with the early "Sunday Morning" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," proved key to Stevens's volume*Harmonium* when it was published in 1923.

Harmonium bears ample evidence of Stevens's wide-ranging talents: an extraordinary vocabulary, a flair for memorable phrasing, an accomplished sense of imagery, and the ability to both lampoon and philosophize. "Peter Quince at the Clavier," among the earliest poems in *Harmonium,* contains aspects of all these skills. In this poem, a beautiful woman's humiliating encounter with lustful elders becomes a meditation on the nature of beauty (and the beauty of nature). Stevens vividly captures the woman's plight by dramatically contrasting the tranquility of her bath with a jarring interruption by several old folk. Consistent with the narrator's contention that "music is feeling," the woman's plight is emphasized by descriptions of sounds from nature and musical instruments. The poem culminates in a reflection on the permanence of the woman's physical beauty, which, it is declared, exists forever in memory and through death in the union of body and nature: "The body dies; the body's beauty lives. / So evenings die, in their green going, / A wave, interminably flowing."

"Peter Quince at the Clavier," with its notion of immortality as a natural cycle, serves as a prelude to the more ambitious "Sunday Morning," in which cyclical nature is proposed as the sole alternative to Christianity in the theologically bankrupt twentieth century. Here Stevens echoes the theme of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" by writing that "death is the mother of beauty," thus confirming that physical beauty is immortal through death and the consequent consummation with nature. Essentially an analysis of one woman's ennui, "Sunday Morning" ends by stripping the New Testament's Jesus Christ of transcendence and consigning him, too, to immortality void of an afterlife but part of "the heavenly fellowship / of men that perish." In this manner "Sunday Morning" shatters the tenets, or illusion, of Christianity essentially, the spiritual afterlife—and substantiates nature—the joining of corpse to earth as the only channel to immortality. In her volume *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Susan B. Weston perceived the replacement of Christianity with nature as the essence of the poem, and she called "Sunday Morning" the "revelation of a secular religion."

Less profound, perhaps, but no less impressive are *Harmonium*'s comedic highlights, "Le

Monocle de Mon Oncle" and "The Comedian as the Letter C." In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" the narrator, a middle-aged poet, delivers an extended, rather flamboyantly embellished, monologue to love in all its embodiments and evocations. He reflects on his own loves and ambitions in such carefree detail that the work seems an amusing alternative to T. S. Eliot's pessimistic poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Like "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" celebrates change, and it further suggests that even in fluctuation there is definition—"that fluttering things have so distinct a shade."

In the mock epic "Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens presents a similarly introspective protagonist, Crispin, who is, or has been, a poet, handyman, musician, and rogue. The poem recounts Crispin's adventures from France to the jungle to a lush, Eden-like land where he establishes his own colony and devotes himself to contemplating his purpose in life. During the course of his adventures Crispin evolves from romantic to realist and from poet to parent, the latter two roles being, according to the poem, mutually antagonistic. The poem ends with Crispin dourly viewing his six daughters as poems and questioning the validity of creating anything that must, eventually, become separate from him.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is a fairly complex work, evincing Stevens's impressive, and occasionally intimidating, vocabulary and his penchant for obscure humor. Stevens later declared that his own motivations in writing the poem derived from his enthusiasm for "words and sounds." He stated: "I suppose that I ought to confess that by the letter C I meant the sound of the letter C; what was in my mind was to play on that sound throughout the poem. While the sound of that letter has more or less variety ... all its shades maybe said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian."

Although the aforementioned poems are perhaps the most substantial in *Harmonium,*they are hardly the volume's only noteworthy ones. Also among the more than fifty poems that comprise Stevens's first book are "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," an imagistic poem highly reminiscent of the Japanese poetry form haiku, and "The Emperor of Ice Cream," an eloquent exhortation that death is an inevitable aspect of living. These and the other entries in *Harmonium* reveal Stevens as a poet of delicate, but determined, sensibility, one whose perspective is precise without being precious, and whose wit is subtle but not subdued. Harriet Monroe, founder and first editor of *Poetry,* wrote in reviewing *Harmonium* for her own periodical: "The delight which one breathes like a perfume from the poetry of Wallace Stevens is the natural effluence of his own clear and untroubled and humorously philosophical delight in the beauty of things as they are."

Few critics, however, shared Monroe's enthusiasm, or even her familiarity, concerning*Harmonium* following its publication in 1923. The book was ignored in most critical quarters, and was dismissed as a product of mere dilettantism by some of the few reviewers that acknowledged Stevens's art. Although apparently undaunted by the poor reception accorded *Harmonium,* Stevens produced only a few poems during the next several years. Part of this unproductiveness was attributed by Stevens to the birth of his daughter, Holly, in 1924. Like his autobiographical character Crispin, Stevens found that parenting

thwarted writing. In a letter to Harriet Monroe he noted that the responsibilities of parenthood were a "terrible blow to poor literature."

In 1933, nine years after his daughter's birth, Stevens finally resumed writing steadily. The following year he published his second poetry collection, *Ideas of Order,* and in 1935 he produced an expanded edition of that same work. The poems of *Ideas of Order* are, generally, sparer and gloomier than those of *Harmonium.* Prominent among these bleak works is "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," comprised of fifty verses on subjects such as aging and dying. Perhaps in reference to these fifty short verses, the racist title refers to the litter that, in Stevens's opinion, accumulated in blacks' cemeteries. He ends this poem by noting the futility of attempts to thwart nature and by commending those individuals who adapt to change: "Union of the weakest develops strength / Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge / One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn? / But the wise avenges by building his city in snow.

Stevens more clearly explicated his notion of creative imagination in "The Idea of Order in Key West," among the few invigorating poems in *Ideas of Order* and one of the most important works in his entire canon. In this poem Stevens wrote of strolling along the beach with a friend and discovering a girl singing to the ocean. Stevens declares that the girl has created order out of chaos by fashioning a sensible song from her observations of the swirling sea. The concluding stanza extolls the virtues of the singer's endeavor ("The maker's rage to order words of the sea") and declares that the resulting song is an actual aspect of the singer. In his book *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem,* Frank Doggett called the concluding stanza Stevens's "hymn to the ardor of the poet to give order to the world by his command of language."

Following the publication of *Ideas of Order* Stevens began receiving increasing recognition as an important and unique poet. Not all of that recognition, however, was entirely positive. Some critics charged that the obscurity, abstraction, and self-contained, art-for-art's-sake tenor of his work were inappropriate and ineffective during a time of international strife that included widespread economic depression and increasing fascism in Europe. Stevens, comfortably ensconced in his half-acre home in Hartford, responded that the world was improving, not degenerating further. He held himself relatively detached from politics and world affairs, although he briefly championed leading Italian fascist Benito Mussolini, and contended that his art actually constituted the most substantial reality. "Life is not people and scene," he argued, "but thought and feeling. The world is myself. Life is myself."

Stevens contended that the poet's purpose was to interpret the external world of thought and feeling through the imagination. Like his alter-ego Crispin, Stevens became preoccupied with articulating his perception of the poet's purpose, and he sought to explore that theme in his 1936 book, *Owl's Clover.* But that book comprised of five explications of various individuals' relations to art proved verbose and thus uncharacteristically excessive. Immensely displeased, Stevens immediately dismantled the volume and reshaped portions of the work for inclusion in a forthcoming collection.

That volume, *The Man with the Blue Guitar,* succeeded where *Owl's Clover* failed, presenting a varied, eloquently articulated contention of the same theme the poet, and therefore the imagination, as the explicator of thought and feeling that had undone him earlier. In the title poem Stevens defends the poet's responsibility to shape and define perceived reality: "They said, 'You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are.' / The man replied, 'Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar.'" For Stevens, the blue guitar was the power of imagination, and the power of imagination, in turn, was "the power of the mind over the possibility of things" and "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal."

The Man with the Blue Guitar, particularly the thirty-three-part title poem, constituted a breakthrough for Stevens by indicating a new direction: an inexhaustive articulation of the imagination as the supreme perception and of poetry as the supreme fiction. Harold Bloom, in acknowledging Stevens's debacle *Owl's Clover,* described *The Man with the Blue Guitar* as the poet's "triumph over ... literary anxieties" and added that with its completion Stevens renewed his poetic aspirations and vision. "The poet who had written *The Man with the Blue Guitar* had weathered his long crisis," Bloom wrote, "and at fifty-eight was ready to begin again."

In subsequent volumes Stevens singlemindedly concentrated on his idea of poetry as the perfect synthesis of reality and the imagination. Consequently, much of his poetry is about poetry. In his next collection, *Parts of a World,* his writing frequently adopts a solipsistic perspective in exemplifying and explicating his definition of poetry. Such poems as "Prelude to Objects," "Add This to Rhetoric," and "Of Modern Poetry" all address, to some extent, the self-referential nature of poetry. In "Of Modern Poetry" Stevens defined the genre as "the finding of a satisfaction, and may / Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Combing. The poem of the act of the mind." In *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Susan B. Weston wrote that in "Of Modern Poetry," as with many poems in *Parts of a World,* "Stevens cannot say what the mind wants to hear; he must be content to write about a poetry that would express what the mind wants to hear, and to render the satisfaction that might ensue." She added, "Stevens's is a conditional world indeed."

Stevens followed *Parts of a World* with *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,* which is usually considered his greatest poem on the nature of poetry. This long poem, more an exploration of a definition than it is an actual definition, exemplifies the tenets of supreme fiction even as it articulates them. The poem is comprised of a prologue, three substantial sections, and a coda. The first main section, entitled "It Must Be Abstract," recalls *Harmonium*'s themes by hailing art as the new deity in a theologically deficient age. Abstraction is necessary, Stevens declares, because it fosters the sense of mystery necessary to provoke interest and worship from humanity. The second long portion, "It Must Change," recalls "Sunday Morning" in citing change as that which ever renews and sustains life: "Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace / And for the particulars of rapture come." And in "It Must Give Pleasure," Stevens expresses his conviction that poetry must always be "a thing final in itself and, therefore, good: / One of the vast repetitions final in themselves and, therefore, good, the going round / And round and round, the merely going round, / Until merely going round is a final good, /

The way wine comes at a table in a wood." *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*concludes with verses describing the poet's pursuit of supreme fiction as "a war that never ends." Stevens, directing these verses to an imaginary warrior, wrote: "Soldier, there is a war between the mind / And sky, between thought and day and night. It is / For that the poet is always in the sun, / Patches the moon together in his room / to his Virgilian cadences, up down, / Up down. It is a war that never ends." This is perhaps Stevens's most impressive description of his own sense of self, and in it he provides his most succinct appraisal of the poet's duty.

Although *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* elucidates Stevens's notions of poetry and poet, it was not intended by him to serve as a definitive testament. Rather, he considered the poem as a collection of ideas about the idea of supreme fiction. Writing to Henry Church, to whom the poem is dedicated, Stevens warned that it was not a systematized philosophy but mere notes—"the nucleus of the matter is contained in the title." He also reaffirmed his contention that poetry was the supreme fiction, explaining that poetry was supreme because "the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure."

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction was published as a small volume in 1942 and was subsequently included in the 1947 collection, *Transport to Summer.* Also featured in the collection is *Esthetique du Mal,* another long poem first published separately. In this poem Stevens explored the poetic imagination's response to specific provocations: pain and evil. Seconding philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Stevens asserted that evil was a necessary aspect of life, and he further declared that it was both inspirational and profitable to the imagination. This notion is most clearly articulated in the poem's eighth section, which begins: "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination. A capital / Negation destroyed him in his tenement / And, with him, many blue phenomena." In a later stanza, one in which Bloom found the poem's "central polemic," Stevens emphasizes the positive aspect of evil: "The tragedy, however, may have begun, / Again, in the imagination's new beginning, / In the yes of the realist spoken because he must / Say yes, spoken because under every no / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken." In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate,* Bloom called *Esthetique du Mal* Stevens's "major humanistic polemic" of the mid-1940s.

In 1950 Stevens published his last new poetry collection, *The Auroras of Autumn.* The poems in this volume show Stevens further refining and ordering his ideas about the imagination and poetry. Among the most prominent works in this volume is "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," which constitutes still another set of notes toward a supreme fiction. Here Stevens finds the sublime in the seemingly mundane by recording his contemplations of a given evening. The style here is spare and abstract, resulting in a poem that revels in ambiguity and the elusiveness of definitions: "It is not the premise that reality / Is solid. It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade." In this poem Stevens once again explicates as the supreme synthesis of perception and the imagination and produces a poem about poetry: "This endlessly elaborating poem / Displays the theory of poetry, / As the life of poetry." Other poems in *The Auroras of Autumn* are equally self-reflexive, but they are ultimately less ambitious and less provocative, concerned more with rendering the mundane

through abstraction and thus prompting a sense of mystery and, simultaneously, order. As fellow poet Louise Bogan noted in a *New Yorker* review of the collection, only Stevens "can describe the simplicities of the natural world with more direct skill," though she added that his "is a natural world strangely empty of human beings."

Stevens followed *The Auroras of Autumn* with a prose volume, *The Necessary Angel,*in which he articulated his poetic notions without resorting to abstraction and obfuscation. In the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" he addressed the imagination's response to adversity, and in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" he once again championed the imagination as the medium toward a reality transcending mere action and rationalization. Consistent in the volume is Stevens's willingness to render his ideas in a precise, accessible manner. Thus *The Necessary Angel*considerably illuminates his poetry.

By the early 1950s Stevens was regarded as one of America's greatest contemporary poets, an artist whose precise abstractions exerted substantial influence on other writers. Despite this widespread recognition, Stevens kept his position at the Hartford Company, perhaps fearing that he would become isolated if he left his lucrative post. In his later years with the firm, Stevens amassed many writing awards, including the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the 1951 National Book Award for *The Auroras of Autumn,* and several honorary doctorates. His greatest accolades, however, came with the 1955 publication of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens,* which earned him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and another National Book Award. In this volume Stevens gathered nearly all of his previously published verse, save *Owl's Clover,* and added another twenty-five poems under the title "The Rock." Included in this section are some of Stevens's finest and most characteristically abstract poems. Appropriately, the final poem in "The Rock" is entitled "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," in which reality and the imagination are depicted as fusing at the instant of perception: "That scrawny cry—it was / A chorister whose *c* preceded the choir. / It was part of the colossal sun, / Surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away. It was like / A new knowledge of reality."

After publishing his collected verse Stevens succumbed increasingly to cancer and was repeatedly hospitalized. He died in August, 1955. In the years since his death Stevens's reputation has remained formidable. The obscurity and abstraction of his poetry has proven particularly appealing among students and academicians and has consequently generated extensive criticism. Among the most respected interpreters of Stevens's work are Helen Hennessy Vendler, who has demonstrated particular expertise on the longer poems, and Harold Bloom, whose *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*is probably the most provocative and substantial, if also dense and verbose, of the many volumes attending to Stevens's entire canon. For Bloom, Stevens is "a vital part of the American mythology."

6. Questions

1. After reading Stevens' "Sunday Morning," discuss the speaker's attitude about God. Does the speaker ultimately believe that God exists?

2. Discuss Stevens' theme that death is an essential element of life. Cite passages in his poetry that support this view.

3. What are some of the symbols that we find in Stevens' Poetry? Cite examples.

4. How does Stevens highlight the theme "seize the day"? In which poems do we find this theme?

5. What symbolic devices do we find in the poem "Anecdote of the Jar"?

7. Further Readings of Wallace Stevens

-*Madame la Fleurie*

-*Metaphors of a Magnifico*

-*Nomad Exquisite*

-*Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself*

-*Of Modern Poetry*

-*Peter Quince at the Clavier*

-*Phases*

-*Poem Written at Morning*

-*Six Significant Landscapes*

-*Study Of Two Pears*

-*Sunday Morning*

-*Table Talk*

-*Tattoo*

-*The Death of a Soldier*

-*The Emperor Of Ice-Cream*

-*The High-Toned Old Christian Woman*

-*The House Was Quiet And The World Was Calm*

-*The Idea of Order at Key West*

-*The Man On The Dump*

-A High-Toned Old Christian Woman

-A Postcard From The Volcano

-A Rabbit As King Of The Ghosts

-Anecdote of the Jar

-Another Weeping Woman

-Bantams in Pine-woods

-Continual Conversation With A Silent Man

-Contrary Theses (II)

-Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock

-Domination Of Black

-Farewell To Florida

-Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour

-Frogs Eat Butterflies, Snakes Eat Frogs, Hogs Eat Snakes, Men Eat Hogs

-Gray Room

-Hymn From A Watermelon Pavilion

-In The Carolinas

-It Must Give Pleasure

-Le Monocle de Mon Oncle

-Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly

-The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad

-The Planet On The Table

-The Plot Against the Giant

-The Poem That Took The Place Of A Mountain

-The River of Rivers in Connecticut

-The Sense Of The Sleight-Of-Hand Man

-The Snow Man

-The Well Dressed Man With A Beard

-*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

-*To The One Of Fictive Music*

-*Two Figures in Dense Violet Light*

-*Valley Candle*

-*What is Divinity*