

# Man in Nature: A New Critical Reading of Wallace Steven's "The Snow Man" in the Context of Modernism

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The study of Wallace Stevens has a long and varied history. His life, poetry and philosophy have been interpreted in the dimensions of romanticism, modernism, postmodernism and ecologism, with focuses on specific aspects such as linguistic structure, the feminine, painting, music and faith. In recent years, studies of Stevens have expanded to include the Chinese elements and the relationship between imagination and reality in his poetry. This thesis intends to examine how irony, ambiguity, tension and paradox cooperate in "The Snow Man" to refresh the reader on man-nature relationship, to understand how Wallace Stevens reflects and reconciles the existential angst of "nothingness" popular in the early 20th century by this poem, and develops a positive or even optimistic attitude.

**Keywords:** "The Snow Man", man-nature relationship, new criticism

Published in Wallace Stevens's first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, in 1921, "The Snow Man" is known for its expression of the naturalistic skepticism and perspectivism. Stevens is also known for his ability to construct a world of his own in poetry, a world based on reality and enriched by imagination. If "The Snow Man" is a world constructed by Stevens, reading the text for a thorough understanding is surely the best way to understand his picture of man and nature, where human consciousness comes across nature in a most delicate way, and the relationship between man and nature is pondered over with new possibilities against the backdrop of nothingness, especially when placed in the context of modernism.

## Nature in One's Consciousness

"The Snow Man" places nature within the speaker's observation and narration, and shows how the speaker's consciousness recognizes, experiences and perceives nature in the season of winter. The choice of winter is no accident for Stevens, as he intends to use winter more than as the backdrop or lyrical evocation of his poetry. George S. Lensing once observes Stevens's season poetry like this: "In the poems of autumn and winter, the complex self willfully withdraws from its own makings and markings upon the world" (Lensing, 2007, p. 118). As a philosophical poet, Stevens deliberately reduces the "self" and looms the poem into a world merges with the natural phenomena like trees, snow, sun and wind, and the mythos of "nothing" that is faintly perceptible to human consciousness.

### **Images of Nature and "Nothing"**

The poem can be divided into 2 parts: (1) line 1-7 carves a vivid picture of the Northern America winter landscape in both near and long shots; and (2) line 7-15 blurs the picture by bringing about the winter land full of barrenness and whiteness and the wind blowing with "nothing". The specific winter images and the abstract "nothing" are juxtaposed to shape the different shades of man's consciousness.

The first line sets the whole poem in the season of "winter", having "frost", "boughs", "pine-trees", "snow", "junipers", "ice", "spruces", "January sun", "wind", "leaves" follow up one by one in the first 3 stanzas to complete a winter picture. Tension is created here among these images: the surface level of the picture is "frost", "snow", "ice", "sun" and "wind", composing an overwhelming natural power ready to destroy life; the underneath is "boughs", "pine-trees", "junipers", "spruces" and "leaves", which are mostly evergreen life resisting the corrosion of winter. The last 2 stanzas offer no more new images of winter except "land" and "place", which introduce a sense of ambiguity and broaden the context of this poem from a scene of winter into a universal space. This is a winter moment for the speaker to see and hear specific life in nature, furthermore, it is a universal moment for the speaker to reach the conclusion that everything in the universe, mysterious and unapproachable like the "wind", is "nothing" in the end.

Speaking of nothingness, modernism has many a spectra to refer to. Hemmingway's short stories offer portraits of the lost generation struggling pathetically to make sense of the pervasive "nothingness" in the early 1900s. But Stevens seems more optimistic about the nature of "nothing". The last 2 lines of the poem—"nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" are ambiguous, for they can be interpreted as: man beholds all that is there, which by nature is nothing; or man discerns that nothing is not there and nothing does exist. The speaker, the listener, and even the reader become "nothing", when human consciousness allows itself to dwell in the sensual connections with nature and further merge with the mysterious nature as nothing.

### **Violence and Stillness**

In line 1-7, the actions related to nature in line 3 and 5 are "crusted", "shagged" and "rough", stressing the violence indulged by both the boughs/trees and the snow/ice against each other. The picture ends up with the long shot of "spruces", and by "in the distant glitter/ Of the January sun", the frozen stillness is stressed. The violence and stillness endowed upon these winter images reflect the tension of nature in human consciousness.

In line 7-15, the tension between violence and stillness continues. The wind brings about sound, which engenders the speaker's "misery", echoing the "mind of winter" and "been cold a long time" in the previous stanzas to upgrade the tension. If observing nature quite objectively affirms man's stillness in life, then thinking of the misery of human existence in the sound of universe and wandering around in the blowing of the wind undoubtedly refer to violence.

Violence is obviously the key word for the early 20th century. The First World War took place and people fell into the torrents of horror, desperation and irrationalism. In this period, to think means to indulge one in miseries and tortures leading to no inspirations. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan ventures for the reason of violence in Stevens's poetry: "At the conscious level, for many years ..... the poet whose 'virility' in his poetry could compensate for the loss of religious faith in the modern world while also providing a psychologically necessary defense against the escalating violence of the century's global wars" (Brogan, 2007, p. 186). Stevens had

discarded religious beliefs early on and endeavored to replace religion with poetry, which allows him to detect the violence and stillness in both nature and life, defend the integrity of human consciousness against the global violence, and probably lead to a peaceful world devoid of unnecessary efforts and struggles.

### Sights and Sounds

Line 1-7 presents nature mostly in visual images, contrasting the surface snowy and icy environment with the underneath evergreen life, to invite the reader to recognize, experience and perceive nature in a most intuitive way. The "wind" shows up from line 8, intermingled with a few images like "a few leaves", "the land", "the bare place", all of which are connected with the "sound" of the "wind", until line 12 brings to the reader an active and forceful action with sound effects by the wind "blowing". The consonants of "( nd )" in line 8-11 create an ear-catching effect, mimicking the resonating sound of wind-blowing and imply to the reader that the mysterious nature has its own tempo unknown and uninterrupted by man. The word "leaves" is verbally ambiguous, for it could mean the falling of leaves with the wind, meanwhile it also implies the death coming with the forceful wind, which is more approachable for human beings through its sounds than sights. The "sound" and "listen" in the last 3 stanzas serve as an irony to stress how unreliable human beings' eyes are in capturing the higher order and secrets of nature about life and death. Thus sound of the wind dilutes the seizable concrete natural images in the above lines and enhances the paradox of nature: being seizable and mysterious, passive and active at the same time.

The impressionist painters exerted great influence upon writers of the early 20th century. Steven's enjoyment of impressionist paintings surely affects his aesthetic sensibility in writing poetry, as we can read from the following lines composed by him in 1906 as responds to works of American Impressionism:

Saw a little [Jean Charles] Cazin at the American Art Gallery to-day called "Departure of Night," that I liked: a step or two of road, a roadside house of white, a few trees and just the sky-full of *clair d'aube*—with three stars, as I remember. He had caught even in so small a painting the abandoned air of the world at that hour, that is, abandoned of humans. If there had been a light in the house—it would have been quite different. One could imagine the dewy air and the quiet. There was an *Israels* that I thought well of: a girl knitting by the sea. I liked her bare feet þ the ordinary sand þ the ordinary water. But what I liked best was that she was not dreaming. There was no suggestion even of that trite sorrow. It was a capital point—exquisite prose instead of dreary poetry. It was as if she had confidence in the ordinary sand þ the ordinary water. And there was a gray-green *Corot*. One noticed, incuriously, an inch of enamored man and an inch of fond woman in the foreground, and one approved. Fortunate creatures to be wandering so sweetly in *Corot*! (Stevens, 1996, pp. 88-89)

His habit of imagining a world in an aesthetic and compositional way, cultivated by wandering through galleries or enjoying the pleasures of nature on/off his way to office, has accompanied him throughout his life and made him one of the writers who could compose poetry as beautiful as paintings. The visual imagery he employs in "The Snow Man" plunges every reader into the pothole of that winter moment, and the depiction of "the sound of the wind" has even created the bleakness through the "leaves" and "bare place", almost untouched by human activities.

All in all, human consciousness enables the speaker to recognize, experience and perceive nature and put these experiences into poetry. "The Snow Man" presents nature as an organic unity in human consciousness, combining concreteness and "nothing", violence and stillness, sights and sounds, etc. The tension created by the opposites in paradoxes enables the reader to imagine nature as a vast being that is beyond human recognition and invite the reader to accept the coexistence of the universe's vastness and nothingness.

### Man in "A Mind of Winter"

T. S. Eliot instructed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Zhu, 2001, p. 38). "The Snow Man" has a speaker describing the winter images with his/her emotions projected into the narration. The speaker in the end develops from "One" into a "listener", which constitutes the tension of human in nature as an agent and as a receiver. Having "One" as the initiator of all the actions greatly enlarges the distance between the speaker and the reader, for "One" is more likely to be neutral/impersonal. Compared with Eliot and Pound, Stevens is less active in claiming his philosophy of literature and his writing differs greatly from poets of his epoch for his aloofness. As Lensing concludes: "Although the poems of the seasons make Stevens into one of the great pastoral poets of modernism, they also trace over four decades the subtle and only partially hidden attempts on his part to justify his own place in the world as an isolated social being" (Lensing, 2007, p. 132). Isolated and aloof as Stevens is, his alertness of a poetic mind enables him to capture the human consciousness hidden behind daily behaviors and transient senses.

#### Behaviors and Mind

As a depersonalized speaker, "One" initiates all the observation and narration, organizing the whole poem with the following actions: "regard", "behold", "(not to) think" and "listen", among which "behold" is repeated twice and "listen" is repeated twice in different forms ("listener as a noun" and "listen" as a verb). All these actions posit human being as the agent and winter images as the observed/felt. The verb "regard" means "to look at" or "to show respect", creating the verbal ambiguity, for "to look at" simply means a behavior that connects man and nature, while "to show respect" concerns both respectful behavior and an attitude derived from rational thinking. Thus, the ambiguous "regard" echoes with the "mind" in the first line, suggesting the depersonalized speaker's means of interpreting nature or composing poetry: actions take place hand in hand with subjective thinking. Again as T.S. Eliot argues: "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (Zhu, 2001, p. 39). As an agent, human behaves out of his consciousness, which is a determining element in observing nature and composing poetry.

#### Senses and Mind

The precondition of speaker's fruitful experience with nature is "One must have a mind of winter, ... And have been cold a long time ...; and not to think of any misery ..." (Stevens, 2009, p. 60). To "have a mind of winter" refers to man's habit of thinking, as well as the irony of the mind's being as empty, numb and still as the winter, and the speaker's urgent need to break free from the icy symbolism of the struggling forces of nature. Although thinking doesn't lead to the final solution to the crisis in the early 20th century, human consciousness can't stop working in misery, and "not to think of any misery" is at least an effort battling human thinking with the revival of senses in nature. Ambiguity exists if we extend "a mind of winter" to the refreshing twists that senses can bring to the mind when rationality is momentarily abandoned. The word "cold" is ambiguous, suggesting both physical chilliness and emotional coldness. Many senses may be numbed by the seasonal or psychological coldness felt by the speaker, yet sight and hearing still remain active, responding to the basic sensual stimuli of nature and transmitting them to the mind. As T.S. Eliot says: "...the poet must develop or

procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (Zhu, 2001, p. 38). In the aspects of nature and poet's mind, Stevens unsurprisingly inherits from the romanticist attitude and develops his own consciousness:

At the moment, the world in general is passing from the fatalism stage to an indifferent stage: a stage in which the primary sense is a sense of helplessness. But, as the world is a good deal more vigorous than most of the individuals in it, what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief. (Stevens, 1996, p. 350)

To Stevens, nature is pure, immortal and independent existence which springs endless imagination, and imagination means "a new belief" of "new romanticism" in the early 20th century.

In a word, to approach the mystery of nature requires one to abandon the habit of thinking habit and rely more on sensual experience, and to write at the beginning of the 20th century demands a poet to condense his feelings and ideas into poetry where the past is inherited and universal concerns are privileged.

### Conclusion

"The Snow Man" consists of 107 words in a long sentence, divided into 5 stanzas. Though not regularly rhymed, it has its own pace and rhythm. The syntax in this poem is quite complicated, as many coordinate constituents follow each other throughout the long sentence. In fact, this form is in keeping with the content, for it displays a picture of all lives coexisting in nature, whose mystery is beyond the reach of any rhyme scheme.

If the title of "The Snow Man" suggests that the snow and man are in a parallel position, the last stanza places the speaker/listener in the snow before realizing that man is nothing, nature is nothing, all is nothing. The existential angst has tormented philosophers ever since Socrates, as human consciousness has been questioning the grounds of value/existence for thousands of years. Nothingness was usually a negative term for writers in the early 20th century, but Stevens has his philosophical perception of nothingness: nothing can be a way of existence; man can live with nature to face the unknown nothing. As James Longenbach observes,

... throughout his career (though less systematically at the beginning of it) he was attempting to satisfy the will-to-believe in the midst of a skeptical age. The supreme fiction was, for Stevens, something to which we assent while knowing it to be untrue; ... Stevens was interested in the usefulness of the stories we tell ourselves rather than their singular truth. (Longenbach, 2006, p. 114)

If the "will-to-believe" leads us away from knowing the truth, at least we have poetry to accompany us, as Stevens once claims: "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (Stevens, 1997, p. 914).

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