

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Study of Self-referential Nature of Wallace Stevens' Poetry

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By

Prakash Tiwari

Roll No.: 230(059\060)

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## 1. Introduction:

### Self-referential Nature of Wallace Stevens' poetry

It becomes meaningful to read Stevens as a poet who always showed his pre-occupation with writing about poetry as the subject matter of his poetry. It is known that Stevens' poetry ranges in various themes from the depiction of natural world to the excessively sensual themes. Wallace Stevens was active in writing poetry during the time of excessive social religious cultural chaos of first half of the past century. He understood the task of writing poetry in terms of focusing on how it can heal the emotional wounds of those who were surviving during those chaotic spans of time through the surrender in the world of poetry. Thus Stevens developed the habit of contemplating on being of poetry in his poems. In other words the method he applied in his poetry writing can be named as self-referential in a sense it showed sheer engagement with the poetry itself. In other words there lies the discussion of poetry within the poetry. In his poems he goes on suggesting how poetry can revive the lost harmony of the world through the medium of poetic contemplation. It is presented as a glorious artifice of the creator which everybody must acknowledge.

From the very first publication of his poetry, Stevens always concentrated on the nature of the poetry itself. Most of the poems collected in *Harmonium* and in other volumes are the better examples of this notion. He created the situations in his poetry where he took active participation in the discussions with an imaginary poetic character or with other suggesting the usefulness of poetry. For example his poetry 'To a High Toned Christian Woman' presents a persuasive discussion where the poet goes on convincing to a Christian woman to have faith in the realm of poetry more than in the realm of religion. In another poem 'The Idea of Order at Key West', a woman singer, who is personification of the human mind and imagination, walks

beside the sea, which symbolically represents the physical universe. Symbolically she is a poem of Stevens who creates her own world full of order that directly contrasts with the chaotic real world. So the poet argues that both religion and poetry are equally fictive products. In a way he wants to claim that the clinging in the non-existent matter like religion is meaningless so it would be better to treat poetry as one of the substitute of religion.

The social unrest due to the recurring wars in the twentieth century made people sentimentally cling in social harmony of the past in nostalgic way. He found people looking for sort of bliss to forget their daily brutalities turning in to the contemplation of mysterious divinely power. In this regard Stevens counter attacked saying after one has abandoned a belief in god then poetry appears taking the place as life's redemption. The same subjective notion of Stevens about poetry governs all his poetic vision. So Stevens argued in favor of poetry through the act of writing poetry. He suggests such people must learn to appreciate the power of poetry. He suggested people must turn toward the solitary church of poetry.

## **2. Statement of the Problem:**

Poetry is always the main subject matter of Wallace Stevens' poetry. For him the act of writing poetry begins along with the meditation on the being of poetry. Self-referential aspect dominates his poetry. He goes on suggesting how poetry can make its reader forget about their daily sufferings or he goes on suggesting how poetry should be used for the pleasure in human life. Moreover, he goes on articulating as poetry can work as one of the substitutions of religion.

In this regard there arise lots of questions about the nature of Stevens' poetry. What are some implications of this kind of nature of Stevens' poetry? How does

Stevens introduce poetry in his poems? Stevens suggests in his poetry to indulge ourselves in the poetic realm to forget daily unfavorable situations, but can he be justified? This research will try to answer the above challenging questions?

### **3. Hypothesis:**

Wallace Stevens' poetry is self-referential in its nature. We find his poetry making argumentation about the poetry itself. His poetry is about the poetry.

### **4. Significance of the Study:**

This research will reveal how Wallace Stevens, in his poetry, makes it the medium of communicating the ideas related to poetry itself. As the value of poetry in the time of Stevens was degrading among the people Stevens's desire is directed towards bringing change in this antipathetic feeling of people towards the sympathetic. The research will concentrate revealing how poet's effort to maintain the order in reality through the means of poetry is materialized.

### **5. Review of Literature:**

After the early verse of Stevens appeared in *'Trend'* and in Harriet Monroe's magazine *'Poetry'* Stevens got commentaries from different readers cum critics. Though his first collection of poetry *'Harmonium'* was sold in minimum level, it received a very significant response from famous reviewers such as Marianne Moore, the famous contemporary poet to Stevens. Harold Bloom, a famous critic remarks about Stevens as, "Stevens had the radiant fortune that attends only the great poets: his most ambitious poem is his best"(76).

Bloom observes the greatest contributions of Stevens in the twentieth century modern American poetry as, "Nothing else in twentieth century poetry written in

English matches the magnificence of Stevens *Notes*, for Stevens has all that Yeats sorely lacked"(76).

Of course the poetry of Wallace Stevens has very significant contribution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry. The critics look at Stevens's poetry from the various perspectives. Some have the opinion that Stevens's poetry is highly abstract. They saw the language used in his poetry highly musical. Here Morton Dauwen Zabel writes, "Stevens' poetry was from the first distinguished by two elements in which he remained largely universal among his contemporaries the richness of his imagery and the sustained confidence of his rhetoric".(165)

Writing about the nature of Stevens's poetry, a famous critic Raluph J.Mills, points out, " ... almost without exception, they are meditations on death or display premonitions of that event."(178) .It has been already noticed that Stevens' poetry has the meditation death and life. The critics found Stevens emphasizing the idea that death is something natural and inevitable for the process of change or let's say for metamorphosis.

John Vernon pointing out the nature of Stevens' poetry states "Many of Wallace Stevens' poems are about this sense of object"(34). The critics have brought into the poetry of Stevens' from various perspectives but the widely governing aspect of Stevens' poetic nature of meditation in poetry itself is not focused throughout. Only the topics such as change, emphasis on the natural world and singing about earthly life are elaborated. Marking the same characteristics of Stevens' poetry, a critic Joseph N. Riddel writes comparing him with Walt Whitman as, " But most important is their mutual acceptance of evil and death as realities to be engaged by the poet"(53).

Lastly, it is clear that none of the critics have made a detailed study of Stevens's poetry through the perspective of his poetry's nature as self-referential.

None of them have analyzed the need and the function of poetry which Stevens suggests in his poetry. Most of the critics analyzed his poetry concentrating on various characteristics except the self reflective mode of his poetic orientation.

## **6. Methodology:**

The research will be based, primarily, on the analysis of author's original text materials. For analyzing the text I'll focus myself being occupied within the frame of my of thesis hypothetical projection. To elaborate the research I will visit libraries. For the better explanation and analysis of the problem presented in the title of research, I will use authentic internet websites. Writings from the critics will be collected and studied for the purpose of proving the hypothesis .I will visit different resource persons such as supervisors and teachers in the department.

### **Chapter Division**

The thesis entails the following chapters.

- i) Analysis of Basic Tenets of Modern American Poetry
- ii) Poetry as Supreme Fiction
- iii) Act of Imagination on Reality
- iv) Conclusion: Position of Artist and Meaning of Art in “a world of things as they are”

## **7. Delimitation:**

Wallace Stevens's poems have been read by critics focusing on various aspects like the need of change, philosophic discussion, conflict between two extremities of human life death etc. But the research here will only focus on self-referential aspects of his poetry.

It is clear to all that Stevens's poetry is numerous in quantities; I'll select some of the representative poems published in the different volumes in different periods of time. As the solution I am looking for regarding reading Stevens's poems is to show the nature of self-referential resulting on meditation on poetry, I am very much aware to make no injustice in the selection. To make my selection logical and justifiable I duly pay attention throughout.

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