ABSTRACT

OF

WALLACE STEVENS: A LACANIAN READING

BACKGROUND

The present research project makes an attempt to study the poetry of Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) by comparing it with the psychoanalytic theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques-Marie Émile Lacan (1901-1981) so as to enhance the understanding and enjoyment of his poetry. Both Stevens and Lacan were, more or less, cotemporaries in the sense that their lives shared the years between 1901 and 1955. This is significant since it was a period when Freud’s (1856-1939) discoveries wielded considerable influence on the contemporary thinkers. Stevens as a thinker, apart from being a poet, shows an awareness of Freud’s discoveries; and Lacan thanked Freud very often in his works, because — to use his own words — “Freud traced for us a clear path” (Écrits 174), along which he, a follower of Freud, proceeded to establish his own radical thoughts. So far there is no evidence indicating Stevens’ knowledge of Lacan’s work or Lacan’s knowledge of the poet. However, it is startling how both developed their thoughts in almost the same direction. The striking parallels between their works includes treatment of issues like structure and functioning of the human mind, the faculty of imagination, reality, the conjunction of the mind with the world without, the role of language in human life etc. The present study concerns elected affinities of thought where both Lacan and Stevens deal with similar, even identical at times, issues that are usually considered the province of psychoanalysis.

Stevens’ chief interest from the beginning to the end was in the interplay between the mind and the outside world. The observations of the conflation of imagination and reality proved infinitely productive for the poet. In a letter to Bernard Heringman he wrote, “My reality-imagination complex is my own...” (Letters 792). The words ‘My,’ ‘complex,’ ‘my own,’ reveal the obsessive quality of his interest in this ‘complex,’ which shaped his work. However, in the same letter, he further writes of his ‘complex,’ “...I see it in others,” suggesting that this ‘complex’ is not merely an experience of an obsessional but also applies to all human beings. This is the point where one not only sees that he was the poet of the universals but also that he was
closer to psychoanalysis — in the sense that what he universalizes are essentially solipsistic experiences.

Although many of the studies of Stevens' poetry show the possible sources and influences that might have gone into the making of his poetry, and though one cannot easily dismiss those suggestions or claims, Stevens' poetry is decidedly unique and goes far ahead of the suggested sources and influences. This is why it still eludes the critic's grasp and remains obscure to a considerable extent. Stevens highlights precisely this uniqueness, again in the same letter to Heringman: “While, of course, I come down from the past, the past is my own...” That is to say, those sources and influences are at Stevens' hand, ready to be reshaped and altered. Such reshaping and altering of the 'past' is also observed in Lacan, who has made tremendous advancements by developing chiefly on Freud, Saussure, Heidegger, and many others. Thus, while Stevens' poetry renders the suggested sources and influences 'not fully adequate,' yet Lacan's thoughts and theories seem to be a more perfect and adequate tool to understand Stevens. Therefore, it is more fruitful to avail of Lacan's theories to make the poet's work more accessible.

Both the poet and psychoanalyst are extremely difficult to read; many researches on them have alleviated the difficulty, though. However, it is what they sought through their discourse that necessitates this difficulty of their language. One has “to immerse oneself in [their] hermetic and baroque style” to find any coherence and know their purpose, since they used this style “as a metaphor of [their] thought” (Ragland-Sullivan 43). In fact, as M. Keith Booker says, “...in neither case the question of style can be separated from the message that is being conveyed by the style,” and further argues that “the writings of both Stevens and Lacan specifically enact for their readers the endless process of desire — both writers resist closure, assuring that the process of reading and interpretation (as the desire of the reader) can never come to an end” (494). Moreover, both authors create, through their discourse, a totally unfamiliar and dialectical structure of the human mental apparatus, and propose equally strange concepts of object-perception and cognition, and view the imagination, reality, and the human desire from a different vantage point.

The principal aim of this study is to enhance the understanding of Stevens' poetry. The method is chiefly that of explication of individual poems, and comparison of the thoughts therein with the psychoanalytical theories propounded by Lacan. However, the analysis through the comparison will not be restricted to the text of the individual poems alone, but an attempt is also made to show and establish the
continuity of a particular idea or thought through the poet’s whole work. The usefulness of such a study lies primarily in resolving the complexities in the nature of the Stevens’ poetics and thought. The study will, hopefully, help resolve to a greater extent the confusion regarding Stevens’ works where he does not seem to yield, and overcome ‘the incessant incompletenesses’ in the reading of his poetry. This study may also be looked upon as an interdisciplinary research since Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories can be substantiated through Stevens’ literary output, thus not only consolidating Lacan’s thoughts or, in a few instances, even opening new vistas for interpreting Lacan but, more usefully, proving through a very concrete example of the poet’s life and work how the psychoanalyst’s theories and thoughts can practically be profitable in the diagnosis of a psychoanalytic patient. In order to accomplish these aims, the following chapter arrangement was seen justifiable.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction to the dissertation briefly discusses how different critics of Stevens tried to fix him in the thoughts or theories formulated before him and why they could be inadequate to do the poet justice. It argues that Stevens’ poetry is decidedly unique and deserves a different approach. It was necessary to show the inadequacy of the view that the use of philosophical analogues “seem an imposition of the critics will [rather] than an exposition of the poet at hand” (Baird xiii). Besides attempting to show the inadequacy of this view, the Introduction briefly argues how Baird’s suggestion for a correct approach to reading literary works can be fruitfully employed even while using a philosophical analogue. Taking a brief purview of Stevens’ concept of supreme poetry as essentially the poetry concerned with the ‘self,’ an attempt has been made to assert his claim to ‘supreme poet.’ Apart from attempting a brief survey of the critical output treating the poet’s concerns with the ‘self’ or using his life to interpret the poetry, it is argued that there is hardly any critic of the poet who seems to take seriously the fact that his is the poetry of his own experiences, which he universalizes. In order to verify Stevens’ claim to being a philosophical poet George Santayana’s commentary on Lucretius has been briefly referred to. This helped to further emphasize that, like the philosophical poets, Stevens’ poetry is unique and much more fundamental than has been so far thought of as.

The Introduction argues how the poet’s deep concern with the ‘self’ makes psychoanalytic approach a better tool for evaluation of his poetry. It takes stock of the

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three article length studies that have attempted psychoanalytic interpretation of Stevens' poetry, and suggests the need to make a deeper study of the poetry from psychoanalytic point of view. A brief attempt has been made here to show parallelism between the thoughts of Stevens and Lacan and to suggest the preference to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories.

Finally, it is suggested that Stevens had some problems at the level of the mental order, that he was a psychoanalytic ‘patient,’ thus preparing a stage to study both the poet’s life and his works and the development of both his person and poetry. It is also suggested towards the end why the present chapter arrangement seemed adequate.

1. **PROLEGOMENA**  
This chapter is a prolego in its real sense to the study of Wallace Stevens as a psychoanalytic patient. It attempts a brief survey of the poet’s life from the available sources, touches upon his development from childhood to youth to maturity. It describes his growth through more noteworthy events of his life collected with a view to merely suggest the roots or causes of his crisis, since they are discussed in greater detail further in the study. The problem of a psychoanalytic patient comes from the outside world; thus, it was necessary to take a good look at what happened around Stevens from that point of view. The ‘Prolegomena’ suggests that the poet’s father caused the problem in his life by opposing the son’s desire to marry Elsie, a beautiful girl from a bleak background. An attempt has been made to show how this affected the poet from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, i.e. how the opposition to the marriage implicated the poet back into the Oedipal triad, and how the father’s death about two and a half years after the quarrel between him and the son over the marriage proposal, during which no word passed between them, exacerbated the son’s crisis. In fact, the period between 1908 and 1912 may be considered the ‘crisis period’ of the poet’s life: he was engaged to Elsie during the Christmas of 1908 in spite of the father’s suggestive remarks that Wallace should marry a girl from a family with useful connections; quarreled with the father some months before the marriage in September 1909; his father died in 1911 without having ever spoken to him after the quarrel; his mother died the very next year, in 1912.

It is looked upon as significant that Stevens wrote poetry even before 1912, but that the poetry written after the crisis period is more weighty and serious, often having psychic overtones. To see him as a patient obviously required a closer look at
his general behavior. This chapter gathers instances of his behavior with people, most of whom found him as living a lonely life. He spoke very abruptly to or about people, who found it strange and often insulting. However, there is one major aspect of him which commands attention, and which provides the important key to his problem: his egotistic attitude. The present chapter collects numerous instances of this attitude and, using Lacan’s view, discusses in brief why Stevens could be described as a neurotic.

With this groundwork, the study proceeds to explore Stevens’ poetry through certain representative poems wherein his crisis is vented.

2. NEUROSIS OF WINTER

The chapter chiefly discusses four poems using Lacanian thoughts: “The Snow Man,” “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” “Re-statement of Romance,” and “Of Modern Poetry.” What is common in them is the poet’s keen observation of what M. Keith Booker refers to as the “dialogic relationship” existing within the human subject, the “I.” This chapter explores the intrasubjective intersubjectivity that exists within the human mind and the poet’s awareness and experiences thereof, of which the four poems mentioned above are almost a direct statement. The discussion of the poems also involves the question ‘What am I?’ that Stevens muses, directly or indirectly, in his poetry more than once, and attempts to find an answer to. This being the question of the neurotic from Lacan’s viewpoint, the possibility of the poet’s being a neurotic is verified and elucidated; in fact, is consolidated. At the same time, the chapter also discusses why the question “Who speaks?” that the poet asks in “A Dish of Peaches in Russia,” or the critic asks of himself about the speaker(s) of the first three of the four poems, and of many other poems as well, must remain unanswered, or, at least, cannot be resolved satisfactorily.

Apart from discussing the poems, the chapter also attempts in some detail the analysis of how Garrett Barcalow Stevens, the poet’s father was responsible for creating neurotic tendencies in the son, thus providing theoretical frame to Stevens’ problem, which was no more than mentioned in ‘Prolegomena.’ To this effect, Lacan’s Schema Z., the graphical representation showing the intersubjectivity, is used along with his comments on subjectivity.

3. BITS OF BLUE

This chapter is devoted to Stevens’ views on the human faculty of imagination — the ‘imaginary order’ of Lacan. The psychoanalyst emphasizes the necessity of the
reordering or reconstitution of the imaginary order if the patient is to recover from his illness, for his crisis affects the order of the domain of the imaginary. Stevens was not only a patient; his claim to a sort of psychoanalyst cannot be overruled since after the problematic volumes — *Harmonium* and, to some extent, *Ideas of Order* — he shifts to the observations of imagination which have close affinities with Lacan’s thoughts on the imaginary order.

The chapter is divided into two sections. Section I is theoretical in nature as it is almost entirely devoted to establishing affinities of thought on the imaginary between the poet and the psychoanalyst. For Stevens’ views on this domain, his essays and other prose works are taken into account, since they can be looked upon as providing a theoretical frame of sorts to the faculty of imagination. He not only treats it as the domain of images and of image formation, but also introduces the unconscious dimension to it. In this respect, his thoughts on the human ability to see resemblances or analogy between things is crucially important, since it is here that the unconscious dimension of the imagination is better realized.

It is not possible to study this faculty or domain without reference to ‘things,’ i.e. reality. This being so, the focal point of its study is object-perception and cognition. Accordingly, the section attempts to show his awareness of different processes involved in perception and cognition; these processes are what Lacan refers to as the imaginary processes, which include processes like introjection, projection, substitution, displacement, expulsion, etc. Like Lacan, Stevens was aware of the fact that the imaginary is the principle of *méconnaissance* or mis(re)cognition. Thus, the poet’s view that “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar” is elucidated (CP 165). However Stevens accepted human nature without complaint and valued imagination as “the only clue to reality,” which is echoed by Lacan as it indeed is. The section also indicates that Stevens linked imagination with human desire.

Finally, the section traces the poet’s awareness that the human sense of ‘self’ is the product of the interplay between imagination and the corporeal world outside, a view shared by the psychoanalyst, who said after the French poet Rimbaud, “I is an other” (Seminar II 7).

Section II proposes to show through some representative poems how Stevens brought his views on the imagination into poetic practice. The “Study of Two Pears” is analyzed to show his study regarding the interplay of the two ‘peers,’ i.e. imagination and reality. His knowledge of the imagination as a set of functions of various processes is brought out with the help of the poem. The poem’s analysis also
shows the imagination as the principle of méconnaissance. “Poem with Rhythms” is discussed with a view to elucidating his thought that images pre-recorded in the mind or unconscious memory compose the essential frame of reference responsible for perceiving the external world around, that one composes oneself or one’s ‘self’ out of images, that one’s mind grows — oneself grows — because of the images against the otherwise nothingness. Like Lacan, Stevens had realized that the study of the ‘self’ is nothing but the study of its images, which have much to do with the world outside. “A Mythology Reflects Its Region” is studied in this section to show the poet’s awareness of this fact, which is crucial in the treatment of a psychoanalytic patient. What psychoanalysis refers to as the ‘history’ of the patient or person, Stevens calls it his ‘mythology.’ In fact, Stevens’ interest in the study of images is quite obvious in the two later poems viz. “Study of Images I” and “Study of Images II,” which command attention for that reason.

The section also treats the ‘North-South’ dialectic in the poetry. The ‘North’ represents the reality not humanized as yet as opposed to the ‘South,’ suggesting the humanized world. The humanization of the world around begins with the image-making process and the consequent human imposition on the world. Stevens’ quest for reality urged him to ‘travel’ towards the ‘North,’ away from the ‘South’ where human imagination could not thrive as much as he wanted it to. Taking a brief view of this dialectic, the section also suggests that the ‘North’ and ‘South’ include the polarity of the unconscious and conscious domains of the human mind, and highlights Stevens’ desire for the former, his desire to know it.

4. JOUISSANCE

Stevens’ psychic life is discussed in greater detail in this chapter. Besides showing how he came to lose the signifier Name-of-the-Father, it proceeds to discuss — from Lacanian vantage point — his psychic reconstruction as akin to feminine structural potential. To show this, Stevens’ ‘desire for the (m)Other’ is elucidated.

The meaning of the French term jouissance includes both pleasure and pain. While the poet’s unconscious desire for the (m)Other is clearly discernible as offering joy to him, it was also the source of pains. This chapter discusses how from the Harmonium years to very late in his life he was haunted by this desire for the Other. The discussion bases itself on some poems, which so far have not received as much critical attention as they deserve. Stevens’ loss of the signifier Name-of-the-Father and his desire for the Other enables his comparison with Shakespeare’s Hamlet; both
were “suspended in the time of the Other,” as Lacan says in describing Hamlet’s situation (“Desire” 17). The chapter is mainly devoted to discussing, with the help of some poems, the poet’s rigid attachment with the unconscious, his enjoyment from those experiences and also the pains thereof. ‘Castration,’ in Lacan’s thought, is one of the most important phases of human psychic life; thus, an attempt is made here to show how Stevens, after his ‘castration’ was again thrown back into a state of ‘improper castration,’ which was ultimately responsible for forcing him into the dyadic situation where only the (m)Other matters, the father virtually vanishing from the subject’s psychic plane. Stevens’ famous poem, “The Comedian with the Letter C,” is analyzed here to suggest that it serves as a metaphor for his alienation from the common world outside and his desire for the inner world. The chapter also verifies whether Stevens was ever liberated from this abnormal desire of the Other; for this, “Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun” was found useful.

5. RUBBINGS OF REALITY

This chapter strives to grasp Stevens’ conception of ‘reality.’ Although most of the thinkers have defined reality as apart from the human, Stevens and Lacan, while they agree with the view, suggest that it is not possible to perceive it without the human, that it is nothing or is a vacuum without the human. The chapter discusses his quest for reality and shows his dissatisfaction over the fact that it is not possible to see “things as they are.” Yet, there are his poems or verses that come close to depict an unmediated perception of reality as it is; the instances of these perceptions show that it is only momentarily that one can approach the ‘real’ real. He captures these moments in a fluid — rather, gaseous, if the word is permitted — imagery. However, the poet has more often resorted to the imagination in order to perceive it, for he believed that “imagination is the only clue to reality.” All these thoughts are elucidated from the poetry using Lacan’s thoughts since both shared similar views insofar as reality perception is concerned.

Like Lacan, Stevens seems to have included the mental life into his conception of reality. The inner world, as he saw it, must therefore be included in his reality. What he calls the “irrational element” anticipates the interruption of the unconscious into the conscious. Yet, what cannot be overlooked is the fact that what one perceives of the real is essentially through the imaginary, senses, feelings, emotions. Thus, Stevens is led to assert that “The truth must be / That you do not see,
you experience, you feel” (CP 219). This is how the real of Lacan or the reality of Stevens cannot be perceived without human intervention.

The chapter suggests that the poet’s conception of reality need be described as psychoanalytic, since in his view it exists both out there and in here and since without the ‘outside’ coming to reside ‘inside’ it is nothing. This is not his anthropocentrism, though; for, he rejects the premise that “man is the intelligence of his soil” (CP 27). In fact, he declares, “his soil is man’s intelligence” (CP 36).

6. APOGEE

This chapter is an attempt to capture the best of Stevens’ poetry from the point of view of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The poems discussed here are considered the best of the poet for two reasons: i) they capture those experiences which he sought through his other poetry as well but achieved in these poems; each of them in a way is the peak of one particular desire; and ii) they have the potential of convincing the reader of his progress from an illness to normality, from the abnormal desire for the Other to the desire of the Other’s desire.

It is not that the themes of the poems discussed here are not found elsewhere in the poetry — in fact, those themes do exist through most of his poetry. However, the profundity of the treatment of the themes, the maturity of his verse, and the intensity of desire in the poems discussed in this chapter remain unsurpassed elsewhere; hence the title of the chapter.

Accordingly, the chapter initially dwells on Stevens’ strong desire for the Other. From this abnormal desire, it moves on to discuss the poet’s desire for the ‘phallus,’ the most important signifier insofar as masculinity is concerned. This is followed by his desire for subjectifying that foreign cause of one’s being and desire which brought one into the world and goes by the name of object(a) in Lacan. The psychoanalyst considered the subject’s relation with object(a) crucial if he is to come to be. The sense of the ‘self,’ the sense that one is, owes to this relation. The desire finds the right path in seeking this object, which Shakespeare’s Hamlet could not find and without which desire remains suspended — oneself remains suspended — in “the time of the Other.” The discussion of the poems in the chapter endeavors to conclude that Stevens might have found the right path for his desire.

7. CONCLUSION

The present study began with the assumption that our knowledge about Stevens’ personal life, that he was a neurotic, and our understanding of Lacan’s
thoughts and theories, as a contemporary thinker and psychoanalyst, can help resolve to a considerable extent the obscurity inherent in Stevens' poetry. After having critically analyzed a number of Stevens' poems from this point of view, the researcher has arrived at the conclusion that his assumption has proved to be true. This study, therefore, is an attempt to vindicate that the obscurity in Stevens' poetry has resulted from his neurosis, and that our understanding of the reasons of his mental crisis, aided by our knowledge of Lacan's thoughts and theories, certainly enhance our comprehension of Stevens' poetry and poetics.

Apart from attempting to render Stevens' poetry more accessible, this study may also be considered as a foray into the application of post-structuralist thought to literary works, which is not found easy by many students of literature. At the same time, unlike in most of the post-structuralist thought, the study does not desecrate the place of the author; instead, it tries to show how the places of both the reader and author can be restored in the enterprise of interpreting literature.

Besides fruitfully applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theories to literary works, the study also shows that they are profitable in the diagnosis of a psychic patient. In this sense, the researcher hopes that the present attempt could be considered as an inter-disciplinary study.