

THEME AND VARIATION: AN  
INTERWEAVING OF MUSICAL AND  
POETICAL FORM IN THE POETRY OF  
WALLACE STEVENS

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AN INTERWEAVING OF MUSICAL AND POETICAL  
FORM IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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An Abstract  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Roberta Butler Mullins

December, 1979

## ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens, one of the most highly respected American poets of the twentieth century, is deserving of the respect afforded him by critics, his peers, and students alike because of a lifetime devotion to the creation and perfection of his craft.

Whether one reads Stevens' poetry for the sheer pleasure of hearing poetic flow or explicates the poetry for intensive study, he is unable to ignore the presence of music. This poet sees in music the creative power of mind over nature or, more precisely, of mind in harmony with nature. Because he desires to make music of his own, he deliberately intertwines poetic genius and musical expertise.

The poet achieves a superb balance between poetic thought and the musical form which structures his poetry. Since this balance is so carefully maintained, one specific musical form, theme and variation, particularly suits his genius. It allows flexibility in verse patterning, meter, and, most importantly, statement and restatement of thematic material. Stevens' thematic development is intricate and diverse; therefore, theme and variation is the musical form with which he felt most comfortable. He combines his musical knowledge with poetic inspiration to produce among his early poetic attempts several admirable examples of this musical form.

Four poems--"Six Significant Landscapes," "Domination of Black," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds"--exemplify Wallace Stevens' implementation of theme and variation. In each instance, he states his theme, then observes it from varying perspectives and develops it through multiple variations without straying from his original purpose. Stevens enhances the musical form by employing metrical variation complemented by either word variation, word repetition, or word substitution. Structural diversification allows the thematic statement to be approached from several perspectives and reinforced in as many ways as the poet deems necessary.

Interestingly, the musicality Wallace Stevens brings to his poetry is as effective in his revelation of the black aspects of reality as it is in his celebration of life. This thesis examines several of his poems which vary in attitude and in degree of complexity but adhere to the theme-and-variation musical technique.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Roberta Butler Mullins entitled "Theme and Variation: An Interweaving of Musical and Poetical Form in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

Edward E. Irwin

Second Committee Member

Malcolm Glass

Third Committee Member

Accepted for the  
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William H. Ellis

Dean of the Graduate School

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To my husband, Jim, I offer my love and gratitude for sacrificing during my long struggle toward the completion of this thesis and for truly believing in my ability to succeed.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to the memory of Anita Alwyn Crist, a dear friend who taught me at a young age to believe in myself. She would be extremely proud.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens is one of the most highly respected American poets of the twentieth century. The respect afforded him by critics, his peers, and students alike is deserved by one who devoted a lifetime to the creation and perfection of his craft. His poetry, spanning more than forty years, exemplifies meticulous agonizing from the formative beginnings to mature, highly perfected works of art.

Whether one reads Stevens' poetry for the sheer pleasure of hearing the poetic flow or explicates the poetry for intensive study, he is unable to ignore the presence of music. Though Stevens' first love was his poetry, his musical ability and his appreciation of music were inextricably linked with his writing. So close is the link that the poet is "best identified, not as a scholar or a philosopher, but as:"<sup>1</sup>

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging  
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives  
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses wholly  
Beyond which it has no will to rise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Kessler, Images of Wallace Stevens (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

Stevens sees in music the creative power of mind over nature or, more precisely, of mind in harmony with nature. This creativity challenges the poet ". . . to put the same degree of intentness into his poetry as, for example, the traveler into his adventures, the painter into his painting . . . ,"<sup>3</sup> certainly the musician into his music. The result, therefore, is a deliberate intertwining of Stevens' poetic genius and his musical expertise, thus fulfilling an intense desire ". . . to make music of his own."<sup>4</sup>

It is upon Stevens' unique "music" that this thesis is based. The music which this poet desired to make fills many of his poetic creations. That is, both content and form are musical, and both contribute to the total thematic statement. This interaction, this reciprocal dependency, occurs in several noteworthy poems, and, therefore, deserves the attention devoted to it by this thesis.

As a prelude to detailing the specific focal point of this study, two levels of poetic complexity must be examined: (1) the complexity within the poet himself and (2) the complexity achieved through the use of music.

It is imperative that one avoid oversimplifying the thoughts and feelings which compelled Wallace Stevens to

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<sup>3</sup>Samuel French Morse, Wallace Stevens, Poetry as Life (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

devote much energy and creativity to his art. His ideas, his attitudes, and the composite of these are far from simple. Stevens always opposed any attempt to simplify what was complex. He felt that the ". . . poet should not merely lead but force his readers into the world of the imagination."<sup>5</sup> He demanded perfection of himself as well by allowing his creative mind to assert itself in striking individuality enhanced by a rare degree of independence.<sup>6</sup> Maintaining his independent nature throughout his life and experimenting with the ideas and beliefs that compelled him to write, Stevens gave to the world a part of himself and his ideals.

Henry Wells contends that by maintaining his individuality and intricacy ". . . he (Stevens) affects what others proclaim: the creation of a new style or 'language' for verse. . . ."<sup>7</sup> This "new style" to which Wells refers is achieved through a versatility whereby all aspects of music contribute to the complex poetic result.

Stevens' first and most obvious use of music in poetry is the musical terminology to which critical works frequently

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<sup>5</sup>Louis Untermeyer, Lives of the Poets (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 699.

<sup>6</sup>Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 5

allude. Henry Wells, for example, offers a fitting overview in his Introduction to Wallace Stevens:

And it deserves notice that Stevens, ever an artist but never a snob, delights not only in the most delicate tones of harpsichord and clavier but in the simplest and most sensuous music of folk tune and folk instruments. Second only to the piano in his affection is the guitar, to which proper reference is made in his poems. The poet of the blue guitar is seldom if ever removed from his music . . . .<sup>8</sup>

Stevens was seldom removed from music because he was fascinated ". . . with music and its power of imposing form upon chaos or flux of human experience, as well as upon the disorder of external nature."<sup>9</sup> The chaotic world continually challenged Stevens to come to terms with it. His poetry became his vehicle for making the world endurable; music became his tool for making reality tolerable. Musical terminology allowed Stevens a link with the world and assisted him in maintaining an equitable perspective.

The initial use of musical terminology evolves into a second, less obvious but equally important use. As illustrated in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," the sounds produced by such instruments as the clavier, bass, cymbals, tambourines, and horns enhance the poetic impact by representing the emotions of the characters about whom the poem

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>9</sup>Kessler, p. 88.

is written. Interestingly, the instrumentation selected by the poet is appropriately matched to each character and to his position within the thematic development. For example, the basses equate to the beating hearts within the elders as they desire Susanna. The arrival and departure of the attendant Byzantines are compared to the drum-like clatter produced by tambourines. Such selectivity adds credibility to the thematic statement by carrying the message through the development to the climactic end.

The dactylic foot, one accented followed by two unaccented syllables, equates to the standard waltz tempo. In "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," Stevens implements this dactylic meter at strategic places throughout the poem to enhance his thematic declaration. This third use of music is less frequently employed; however, its presence adds dimension to Stevens' overall experimentation and flexibility. Certainly the metrical feet are carefully chosen and placed to emphasize particular words or phrases. Stevens artistically utilizes the musicality of the language often by drawing attention to a passage or reinforcing a previously stated point.

Stevens' fourth use of music, and the most important to this study, is in the structure of his poetry. As one views the wealth of masterful poetry, he observes Wallace Stevens' genius for construction. A fitting remark from Henry Wells draws one's attention to the way Stevens

employs various kinds of music as structuring devices for his poetry. One must view ". . . each poem in such a manner that it shall be a self explanatory microcosm. The exposition . . . lies not upon the surface but within the framework. "<sup>10</sup>

Certainly the structure, the framework of many of Stevens' finest poems, owes as much to musical as to literary form. Careful scrutiny of his poetic development reveals a parallel between the purposeful implementation of specific musical form and poetic structure.

Early lyrical sonnets and ballades introduce the poet's conspicuous appreciation of music and dancing. "Assisted above all by his acute ear . . . as well as by his feeling for music and the dance, he wrote many works that in the more extensive understanding of the term can be called lyrical."<sup>11</sup> The lyrical pieces range from " . . . longer and more formal pieces resembling short choral odes to brief and spontaneous pieces resembling airs."<sup>12</sup>

As Stevens became more comfortable with his writing, he experimented with other more complex musical forms. "The Rock, Seventy Years Later" is the first poem of a

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<sup>10</sup>Wells, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

trilogy written rather late in Stevens' life. Its musical form is an example of the madrigal, a composition of two or more unaccompanied voices orating in a combination of sound. This form interested Stevens probably because of the treatment of words in short phrases. The less formal madrigal allowed his experimentation with the dramatic effect of the melodic line.

The medium of poetry often displays melodic phrasing perceived as audible musical lines. Certainly Stevens is considered one of the masters; as John Ciardi proclaims, ". . . one falls in love with Stevens . . . for his magnificent ear . . . and speech . . . which overflow with . . . music. Stevens teaches the language its own singing possibilities."<sup>13</sup>

A more widely acclaimed, more ambitious intertwining of musical form with poetry is "Peter Quince at the Clavier," referred to earlier with regard to instrumental sounds equating emotions. The structure of this work is quite frequently compared to a symphony. A splendid example of example of harmony and contrast, this poem is divided into four parts corresponding to the four movements of a symphony. Each relates to the other parts by motif; each differs in rhythm and mood.

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<sup>13</sup> John Ciardi, "Wallace Stevens's 'Absolute Music,'" Nation, CLXXIX (October 16, 1954), 346-347.

Robert Buttel in his book, Wallace Stevens, The Making of Harmonium, supports this assumption by referring to Stevens as " . . . the musical imagist . . . who . . . created in 'Peter Quince' his own more succinct 'symphony' . . . ." <sup>14</sup> Marianne Moore surpasses this general observation to compare "Peter Quince" with Handel's Sonata No. 1. <sup>15</sup> It is evident that music abounds in Stevens' poetry.

The compatibility of the two art forms, poetry and music, regardless of the degree to which one compares them, may be attributed to two distinct similarities. First, each art form is an expression of the individual artist's intense personal feeling. Second, once composed, each work of art must be read as written word by word, note by note, yet each may be individually interpreted.

A detailed explication of Wallace Stevens' poetry reinforces this premise as one recalls that poetic tone equates mood. Music achieves a mood through the arrangement of notes, of sounds. This poet achieves both through precise word choice, and thus transcends both art forms. Paul Rosenfeld in his essay, "Wallace Stevens," states that

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Buttel, The Making of Harmonium (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 138.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

". . . as a musician, Stevens is revealed an almost impeccable craftsman."<sup>16</sup>

The craft perfected by this poet is a superb balance between poetic thought and the musical form which structures the poetry. Because this balance is so carefully maintained, one specific musical form particularly suits this poet's genius. Theme and variation is beautifully adapted by Stevens for several reasons. This musical form allows flexibility in verse patterning, meter, and, most importantly, statement and restatement of thematic material. Theme and variation is the musical form with which Stevens probably felt most comfortable since his thematic development is intricate and diverse and thus necessitates restatement in varying ways.

Not all critics agree on every interpretation of Stevens' poetry, but all seem to agree on the intensity and diversity with which he presents and develops his themes. The ever-present originality distinguishes him from many other artists and allows him to examine life in his multifarious way. Though his own life was decidedly unglamorous and devoted in part to achievement in the business world, Stevens persisted in and relished his other world, his

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<sup>16</sup>Paul Rosenfeld, The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, ed. Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1962), p. 40.

world of the arts. The intelligence he brings to his poetry combined with the knowledge gained from being well read results in intricate interweavings of ideas and examinations of thematic statements from every plausible perspective. Certainly his appreciation and knowledge of music add further dimension to his creativity.

The theme with variations is one of the most common musical forms experimented with by novice composers. As an artist, Wallace Stevens is no exception. He combines his musical knowledge with poetic inspiration to produce among his early poetic attempts several examples of this musical form which are worthy of notice.

Stevens' early poems represent the beginning of many years of toil by a man whose one joy, whose one obsession was to write poetry. Even in the beginning, Stevens' poetry was never shallow. His intelligence, his knowledge, his sincere interest in observing and questioning the world around him are reflected in his writing. The fact that Stevens dissects a theme, rather than superficially stating it and then proceeding, explains why the theme-and-variation musical form is precisely the vehicle he needed and experimented with in his writing. The difficulty attributed to Stevens' poetry stems primarily from the manner in which he presents and examines his themes. He states a theme and then observes it from varying perspectives. He presents his thoughts through multiple variations without ever completely

straying from his original purpose. Stevens enhances the theme-and-variation form by employing metrical variation complemented by either word variation, structure diversification, or word substitution, thereby varying the phrase. For example, in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," the word "blackbird" is present throughout. However, the word substitution occurs as the verb used in conjunction with the blackbird is varied to further the blackbird's progress.

In "Domination of Black" Stevens varies the form of the word "turn" to complement the musical variation. He repeats "turned" and "turning" throughout describing the leaves and comparing other objects to them. The structural variations allow the thematic statement to be approached from several perspectives and, therefore, reinforced in as many ways as the poet deems necessary.

As a basis for further understanding the way an artist implements the theme-and-variation musical structure, a brief discussion of the familiar musical theme which resounds through Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is appropriate.

The theme around which Beethoven's most famous symphony evolves is recognizable from the instant the opening phrase sounds. The renowned four-note pattern is stated then repeated in rapid succession, establishing the thematic statement and engraving the musical pattern on the listener's mind.

The Victory Theme, as it is called, begins with three E-natural quarter notes followed by one half note sounded a third below. The pattern is repeated with three D-natural quarter notes followed by one half note tied to a second half note once again sounded a third below. The modulation adds interest to the theme and reinforces its familiarity as the listener becomes interested in the development of the musical work yet remembers the underlying theme.

Beethoven insures this involvement by utilizing three distinct musical variations. First, after the theme has been well established through the melodic line, it is echoed in the base line. Second, wherever appropriate, the reverse of the thematic statement is sounded in the base as the melodic line carries the theme forward. Third, suspense is maintained as the composer progresses the theme through half note, quarter note, and eighth note variations, increasing the tempo and the musical excitement.

With the theme firmly stated, this composer then proceeds with his musical work, his symphony. Beethoven leads his listener through four movements, each varying as the particular section requires, each retaining shades of the original musical declaration.

Just as the listener attunes his ear to the recurring four note pattern in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, so the reader may complement Wallace Stevens' inventive ability by searching for and recognizing recurring thematic state-

ments throughout his poetry. This discovery may best be achieved if one recalls and acknowledges similarities between music and poetry and the adaptability of theme-and-variation musical form to Stevens' poetry.

The change in tempo in a musical piece may be equated to the change in meter in a poem. Repetition of a musical phrase, as in the four note pattern present throughout Beethoven's Fifth, may be recognized in poetry as the repetition of key words or phrases. The variations on the theme achieved by varying the length and key signatures of musical passages may be observed in poetry as the line length and the stanza length vary to develop the theme.

It is my intention, therefore, to examine several of Wallace Stevens' poems which vary in degree of complexity but adhere to the theme-and-variation musical technique.

## CHAPTER II

### SOMBREROS: VARIATIONS IN "SIX SIGNIFICANT LANDSCAPES"

Wallace Stevens' intricate poetry reveals an intensity about the poet himself. Therefore, we may assume that at least some of his poetry exists to introduce and to develop thematic material indicative of his ideals. Certainly any effective poet develops his themes. However, what distinguishes those poems by Stevens which adhere to the theme-and-variation musical form is the degree to which the thematic development is carried. An initial clue to Stevens' purpose may be found in the specific scitoning he employs. His theme-and-variation structuring goes beyond regular stanza division and, therefore, does not apply to all of his poems. Deliberate divisions are recognizable by the Roman numerals designating stanza divisions in all except one poem examined in this study. The exception does, however, contain three precise stanza divisions structured by a clear distinction between the speaker's inner and outer worlds.

"Six Significant Landscapes," one of Wallace Stevens' early attempts at the theme-and-variation musical form, reveals six definite sections, each of which presents a different, distinctive landscape. The landscapes include a pastoral scene with the central character becoming a part of the nature that specifically affects him in that

setting, a night evoking a mysterious air, a comparison of one person with one element in nature, a landscape in space seen through a dream, a landscape of the cold reality of life, and finally an observation of rationalists who will not allow landscapes, nature, to affect them.

John Enck contends that, though the mysterious aspect of nature is emphasized in section two of "Six Significant Landscapes," ". . . under given circumstances any aspect of the world need not lack mystery."<sup>1</sup> He may very well be suggesting that the complexity of Stevens' poetry adds to the mysterious overtones consistently present.

The underlying thematic statement in this poem which is emphasized through several variations is that we affect objects in nature by projecting our moods and emotions on them just as certainly as those same objects affect us. The mystery lies within the reciprocal relationship. Stevens expects his readers to endure the struggle of understanding his multiple purpose and his meaning.

Robert Buttell believes that ". . . for Stevens it is the function of the imagination to encompass both day and night and all they represent. . . ."<sup>2</sup> In "Six Significant Land-

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<sup>1</sup>John J. Enck, Wallace Stevens, Images and Judgments (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Buttell, p. 123.

scapes," Stevens includes views of the world through the examination of landscapes during both daylight and darkness.

In this poem, as in others utilizing this musical form, Stevens examines a theme from many angles and emphasizes it through examples, through variations, which reinforce the original assertion.

Stanza one contains eleven short, rapidly flowing lines. The old man, the focal point of the stanza around whom the theme revolves, sits and observes nature.

An old man sits . . .  
He sees larkspur, . . .  
Move in the wind.<sup>3</sup>

As he sits and observes, his beard moves, the pine tree moves, and the water flows.

His beard moves in the wind.  
The pine tree moves in the wind.  
Thus water flows  
Over weeds.

(p. 16)

In stanza one, the old man is not merely communing with nature. The parallels are much stronger, suggesting that the motion of the larkspur becomes the motion of the man's beard, which in turn becomes the motion of the pine tree and ultimately the motion of the water flowing. The reciprocal effect of nature upon man and of man upon nature is achieved in this

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<sup>3</sup>Wallace Stevens, The Palm at the End of the Mind, Selected Poems and a Play, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 15-16. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

section. The effect is reinforced through the repetition of the phrase "in the wind." Each element paralleled in nature "moves in the wind."

Stanza two, the first variation upon the original theme, is a series of nine short lines comprising three complete thoughts. The particular wording Stevens employs exemplifies the flexibility of this form and provides an element of mystery within the thematic statement. Night is the focal point.

The night is of the color  
Of a woman's arm:  
Night, the female,

Conceals herself.  
A pool shines,  
Like a bracelet  
Shaken in a dance.

(p. 16)

Night is initially simply the color of a woman's arm, but ultimately becomes the woman. The effect is once again intense enough so that one object becomes another.

A shift from third person to first appears at the outset of stanza three.

I measure myself  
Against a tall tree.

(p. 16)

The speaker compares himself to a tree and concludes that he is taller. He becomes something beyond, something larger imaginatively rather than literally.

I find that I am much taller,  
 For I reach right up to the sun,  
 With my eye;  
 And I reach to the shore of the sea  
 With my ear.

(p. 16)

The speaker's emotions are so intense that he reaches both the sun and the sea by transcending his physical body.

Stevens seeks to come to terms with a total reality in his third variation. The speaker's dream is personified as it is clothed in a white gown.

When my dream was near the moon,  
 The white folds of its gown  
 Filled with yellow light.  
 The soles of its feet  
 Grew red.  
 Its hair filled  
 With certain blue crystallizations  
 From stars,

(pp. 16-17)

The dream's feet and hair project the colors of an impending sunrise. The speaker has become the moon that fades as the sun emerges to begin a new day. Stevens feels that the function of the imagination is to encompass every possible aspect of whatever image is projected. Simplicity to Stevens is uninteresting, unchallenging, and, therefore, inexcusable. Through the use of personification and through his dream, the speaker is able to become a part of what he is describing. His imagination places him in the situation allowing him to experience and to become a part of his perception of reality.

Robert Buttell adds an interesting insight into the atmosphere of the dream in section four:

The atmosphere of dream and nightmare . . .  
is as significant as the colors which  
accentuate it. By drawing on the dis-  
tortions of dream experience in the  
manner of some modern painters, Stevens  
found further means of projecting the  
subjective sense on the object, giving  
it the strange lucidity that we en-  
counter in our own dream states.<sup>4</sup>

The fifth stanza continues the thematic statement through a variation that is less pastoral, less nocturnal, and more glaring than the previous ones. The effect of one object in nature upon another is achieved in spite of adversities. The star carves its own place in the system of things.

Not all the knives . . .  
Not all the chisels . . .  
Nor the mallets . . .  
Can carve  
What a star can carve  
(p. 17)

The star carves its own place through less crude, less forced carvings. This landscape displays cold reality against nature's soothing reality.

The sixth and final landscape is a total departure from the previous variations. Stevens uses the final stanza to ridicule rationalists, though this variation may be the most effective of all. It is the rationalists who

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<sup>4</sup>Buttell, p. 161.

will not allow themselves to affect objects in nature nor will they recognize and accept the effect nature has on them.

Rationalists, wearing square hats,  
Think in square rooms . . .  
They confine themselves  
To right-angled triangles

(p. 17)

If the rationalists would deviate from their sterile world, they ". . . would wear sombreros"(p. 17). The contrast between square hats and sombreros is a comical one, but the reasoning behind employing it is quite serious. Stevens possesses the ability to view an object, a situation, a premise from unlimited perspectives, from varying points of view. He never wished that anything be easy; he wished for thought-provoking challenges. Consequently, his ridiculing of rationalists is appropriate to his point of view and to this poem. The reality of the narrowness of their existence proves a necessary and effective final variation on this theme.

Wallace Stevens does not resolve his premise in this poem. Resolution is not his intention. However, his variations support and reinforce the thematic statement which is that a reciprocal effect exists between nature and man. "Six Significant Landscapes" illustrates this theme through six settings and the situations which result from each.

### CHAPTER III

#### CRY AGAINST TWILIGHT - THE ROOM AND BEYOND: VARIATIONS IN "DOMINATION OF BLACK"

"Domination of Black," another of Wallace Stevens' early poems, exemplifies a second implementation of the theme and variation musical form. Like "Six Significant Landscapes," it contains precise structuring and a detailed thematic development.

This second poem explores the black aspects of reality through a setting comprised of one room in which the speaker confines himself and the black world, which is the outside world of the unknown. The stanza division is clearly drawn between the inside world detailed in the first two stanzas and the outside world viewed from the inside in the third and final stanza. Therefore, the division is clearly drawn without the use of Roman numerals.

The improvement upon the musical form in "Domination of Black" over "Six Significant Landscapes" is the strengthening of the theme through the repetition of key words and phrases. This repetition serves to enhance each variation while retaining the underlying theme.

The speaker reveals what he sees in his room, specifically misinterpreted similitudes, and what he thinks he sees outside. The fire distorts what is being reflected

inside and allows the speaker to see things that are not there. The misinterpreted reflections feed the speaker's imagination to such a degree that his actual perceptions are no longer accurate.

William Burney explains his view of what "Domination of Black" does with visual experience.

It expressed the inner-outer character of experience: there is a correspondance between colors inside the room and those outside. In general, when Stevens uses the image of a room, a window, he is thinking of the mind with some mode of perception, characteristically visual.<sup>1</sup>

According to John J. Enck, one element within this poem's thematic statement is that ". . . an awareness of personal inadequacy causes fear."<sup>2</sup> The blackness and the fear evoke a situation in which the prospects of death or nothingness are intensified. Complexities of the thematic statement are illustrated here through carefully planned exercises, variations, which examine the relationship between perception and imagination. The title, "Domination of Black," offers the reader a hint at the tone of the poem. The blackness is a substantial contributor to the thematic impact that results. Note, however, that the one color specifically stated, black, appears only in the title. Nevertheless, the presence of

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<sup>1</sup>William Burney, Wallace Stevens (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Enck, p. 72.

the blackness is devastating. "The control of color, cadence, and design for the forceful effect of 'Domination of Black' is a major advance in Stevens' art."<sup>3</sup>

The first of three stanzas is divided into three distinct sentences.

As night, by fire,  
The colors of the bushes  
And of the fallen leaves,  
Repeating themselves,  
Turned in the room  
Like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind.

(p. 14)

The opening line contains the black "night" and sets the eerie tone. The fire to which Stevens refers may be literally a fire, or it may be a lamp illuminating the colors of the bushes and fallen leaves. What is important is that the visual perception suggested by this image intensifies the imagination and creates an atmosphere of fear.

Stevens uses the words "turned" in line five and "turning" in line seven for effect initially and as a variation in subsequent, strategic placements. As the blackness descends, visual perception is distorted by artificial light, and the imaginative forces strengthen.

The second sentence in stanza one contains a word that reappears in each subsequent stanza, hemlocks.

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<sup>3</sup>Buttel, p. 175.

Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks  
Came striding.

(p. 14)

The dark greenness of the hemlocks, the evergreens, is remembered. Immediately, something else which furthers the variations on the theme is remembered.

And I remembered the cry  
of the peacocks.

(p. 14)

Stevens' word choice " . . . came striding . . ." presents an image of the trees moving toward the house surrounding it with darkness.

The first variation appears at the beginning of stanza two. The second and longest of the stanzas shifts the emphasis from night, the darkness, to the peacocks.

The colors of their tails  
Were like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind,  
In the twilight wind.

(pp. 14-15)

Stevens repeats the word "turning," which is varied to include the "colors" in the peacocks' tails, and then alludes to the twilight. Perhaps this variation occurs not in total darkness but at the time just before night falls. Blackness, death, does not appear in stanza two; however, the reality of its inevitability is present. Stevens is merely approaching his theme from another angle. The speaker continues:

They swept over the room.  
 Just as they flew from the  
 boughs of the hemlocks  
 Down to the ground.  
 I heard them cry--the peacocks.

(p. 15)

In stanza one, the speaker remembers the peacock's cry. In stanza two, however, he hears the cry. Thus the variation moves the reader as well as the speaker from a memory to reality. The two quatrains ending stanza two may not be rhetorical.

Was it a cry against the twilight  
 Or against the leaves themselves  
 Turning in the wind  
 Turning in the flames  
 Turned in the fire,  
 Turning as the tails of the peacocks  
 Turned in the loud fire,  
 Loud as the hemlocks  
 Full of the cry of the peacocks?  
 Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

(p. 15)

It is apparent that the peacocks in which the speaker has faith have gone out into the night to face the blackness. Yet the speaker remembers their first, unsuccessful confrontation. The questioning asks against whom the peacocks cried out.

Stevens contends that it is the imagination which distinguishes man from his environment, and that through the imagination, through the gift of human understanding, one may view the world. In this poem, however, the speaker's world is an isolated one. He has confined his physical body to a room, thereby restricting his mind and his imaginative

powers as well. Rather than giving order to the reality of the moment, the speaker's imagination harbors only fear.

Stanza three offers a third variation upon the original theme as the speaker shifts his emphasis for a third and final time while retaining the essence of his original, terror-provoking theme. The speaker views the outside world for the first time; yet he views it through a protective shield, the window.

Out of the window,  
I saw how the planets gathered  
Like the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind.

(p. 15)

Though his image extends beyond this world to encompass the planets, the result is the same. The theme is as ever-present as the blackness. It would seem that the planets are as doomed as the leaves.

I saw how the night came,  
Came striding like the color  
of the heavy hemlocks.

(p. 15)

Just as the hemlocks came striding against the peacocks, now the night, a larger force, strides against the hemlocks. The speaker's fears have not been quieted. Rather, they have been reinforced.

I felt afraid.  
And I remembered  
the cry of the peacocks.

(p. 15)

Stevens' theme and three variations upon it are further emphasized by the devices he employs. Repetition is the most evident and most effective. The words "turning" and "turned" are repeated for emphasis and effect and are followed by a prepositional phrase, an anapestic foot in every instance. As the tension and the fear grow within the speaker, the more frequently these phrases appear. In stanza two, five successive lines

Turning in the wind  
 Turning in the flames  
 Turned in the fire  
 Turning as the tails of the peacocks  
 Turned in the loud fire  
 (p. 15)

vary the wording but retain the drum-like effect.

Comparisons, specifically similes, appear throughout and are enhanced by alliteration which furthers the rather eerie flow.

Turned in the room  
 Like the leaves themselves  
 Turning in the wind.  
  
 I saw how the night came,  
 Came striding like the color of the  
 heavy hemlocks.  
 (p. 15)

Through his thematic development, Stevens presents the relationship between perception and the imagination in terms of the black aspects of reality. The inevitability of death, a thematic presence, is no less vivid when it is imagined than when it is actually perceived.

In fact, the imagination makes the blackness more terrifying.

The intensity is compounded by the realization that the outside world is much too complex for the speaker to face. The domination of the blackness, the reality of impending death, occurs within the superficial safety of one's dwelling as well as outside in the world of the unknown, the unseen, as exemplified through three distinct variations. On another level, death may be also the demise of one's imagination since Stevens believes that the imagination gives substance to reality. However, the darkness, the absence of light, distorts the imaginative process. It does not lessen it; it generates the imagination while entombing reality.

"Domination of Black," the title, suggests that the blackness, the death, which is inevitable, permeates and dominates the entire poem. The elements of reality, the tangible aspects either present or remembered, are dominated by the doom foreshadowed in the title. The leaves, the peacocks, even the planets are all doomed to an inevitable destruction. Through precise structuring and careful thematic variations, Stevens further advances this flexible musical form.

## CHAPTER IV

### INFLECTIONS AND INNUENDOS: VARIATIONS IN "THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD"

Wallace Stevens improved the musical technique of theme and variation through his continual efforts at perfecting his poetry and thereby perfecting this form.

One of his more popular poems and one which beautifully exemplifies Stevens' genius in the use of this musical form is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." It is appropriate to preface a discussion of this poem by alluding to Images of Wallace Stevens, in which Edward Kessler says of Wolfgang Mozart, "His music, like all the earth's music, survives all of man's attempts to make this a universe of death."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this quotation may be transferred to Stevens and his "music" as he develops a theme presented earlier in "Domination of Black." His theme is a hopeless one in that death is inevitable. Yet, his "music," his poetry, will live on. He will continue to reveal the difference between imagination and perception. By restating and elaborating upon the black aspects of reality in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens carefully yet thoroughly illustrates the relationship between imagination and actual perception and the reciprocal effect

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<sup>1</sup>Kessler, p. 109.

each has upon the other. Through his "music," he contributes to the reader's enlightenment and at the same time reveals an unpleasant reality.

The underlying theme of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is implied in the title. A skimming of the poem reveals thirteen brief stanzas of fluctuating line length. The "looking" to which Stevens devotes this poem seems to be an alternation between the literal eye and the mind's eye with each of the thirteen stanzas varying the theme yet retaining the ever-present blackbird. The retention of the central figure is one way Stevens details his structure and reinforces his thematic declaration.

According to Alan Perlis, Stevens uses music ". . . to demonstrate the relationship between poetry and thought, poetry and feeling, and poetry and external nature."<sup>2</sup> The thought, feeling, and external nature are interwoven throughout "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Therefore, the theme and variation musical form is the natural choice for Stevens to present his extremely involved ideas.

On another level, the boundaries of reality, the thirteen ways in which the blackbird is observed, reflect a secondary phase in the thematic development. "The

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Perlis, Wallace Stevens, A World of Transforming Shapes (Cranbury, New York: Associated University Press, Inc., 1976), p. 136.

boundaries of reality are extended to include the unconscious, and interplay between the imagination and the actual is dramatized and made more complex, with attendant effects of wit, humor, and grotesquerie, often combined as they are in the unconscious."<sup>3</sup> The combination to which Buttet refers intensifies in this poem the terror evoked by the feeling of impending death.

Intricate interweaving of the theme and variation upon the theme is partially achieved through verse patterning. Specifically, Stevens structures thirteen stanzas in a manner which will emphasize his theme. Therefore, while the stanzas vary in length from two to seven lines, inconsistency in stanza length does not detract. It simply exemplifies Stevens' flexibility and enhances his entwining of thematic material.

No rhyme scheme is present and only infrequent eye rhyme is employed. Rather, Stevens chooses to allow declarative and interrogative sentences to state and restate his theme. Each verse is patterned around the blackbird in such a way that the circular motion of the bird and of the poetry itself encompasses the totality of the thematic affirmation.

The first stanza introduces one blackbird juxtaposed with twenty snowy mountains. The black against white evokes

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<sup>3</sup>Buttet, p. 191.

an immediate image within the mind's eye. The shocking literal eye of the bird displays the only movement.

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

(p. 20)

The near-rhyming of twenty, snowy in line one followed by the rhyming of moving, thing allows definite contrast to the singular eye in the final line of stanza one. The musical motion of the previously stated rhyming examples enhances the motionless image.

As an overview, the remaining twelve stanzas are variations on the original theme as the stanzas move from silence through sound to silence again. The first and last stanzas present the blackbird as harshly silent. The variations throughout emphasize inflections and innuendos in the bird's call thus relating the existence of actual perception and imagined realities of the situation.

Stanza two begins with a staccato spondaic foot in conjunction with two prepositional phrases each comprising an anapestic foot.

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

(p. 20)

Stevens' knowledge and appreciation of music would never have allowed him to utilize a musical form superficially or partially. He was no doubt aware of the two

types of musical variations on a theme from which he could choose. Because of the advanced skill this poem represents, a pause in the explication is required at this point in order to determine which type of variation upon a theme Stevens is employing. The ornamental variation which aims at brilliance and virtuosity traditionally retains the harmonic basis of the theme. It characteristically dissolves the melodic line into outlines and short passage work ultimately encircling the theme. Specifically, the composer develops his theme by retaining and inserting short musical thematic phrases throughout his development. He may change keys and vary his meter as often as he wishes, but his theme usually evolves through the repetition of one recognizable phrase.

The characteristic variation differs from the ornamental one by transforming the theme, thus giving the theme a different character, a different shading, often straying daringly far from the original theme. Happily, however, actual contact is never truly lost.

In terms of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," the former variation offers Stevens the type of latitude he requires. The melodic line could be varied in meter and length while still approaching the theme from every direction. Both musically and poetically, the ornamental variation is especially effective because it " . . . gives the

imagination endless opportunities without losing itself in limitless space . . . and . . . the theme is a fixed point shining through variations."<sup>4</sup> What a perfect vehicle for a poet whose imagination and experimentation with it knew no boundaries!

Stanza three consists of the first of only two duo line combinations in the poem. Interestingly, it is also the first actual movement present thus far. The ever-present blackbird "whirls," giving movement and force to this important variation.

The blackbird whirled in the  
autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the  
pantomime.

(p. 20)

Calm exists in stanza four with the return of the previously stated trochaic and anapestic feet.

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

(p. 20)

Calmness does not imply a lack of motion, however. Variations on an originally stated melody seldom if ever stop the forward movement of the musical statement. Certainly fluctuations add interest and continue the theme on its way.

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<sup>4</sup>Hugo Leichtentritt, Musical Form (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 104.

The theme and variation to this point may be summarized by the subject-verb combinations Stevens employs. The blackbird is initially motionless with the exception of his eye. Gradual movement begins with a blackbird whirling and reverts to the blackbird simply existing--the blackbird is. The blackbird then whistles.

Stanza five seems to vary the theme through a choice offered by the poet. He does not know which to choose, literal beauty or imagined beauty.

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

(p. 20)

Is the actual sound, the whistling, more satisfying than the silence that follows, the remembered sound? These observations foreshadow the kinds of variations present in subsequent stanzas.

Stanzas six and seven illustrate a type of variation within a variation, specifically two kinds of motion. The shadow of the blackbird first moves back and forth across a window with no apparent speed or determination.

The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

(pp. 20-21)

Implied purpose for the movement that occurs in stanza seven--the blackbird walking--crescendos to the halfway point of the poem. The questioning seems to preface the

remaining variations which follow.

O thin men of Haddam,  
 Why do you imagine golden birds?  
 Do you not see how the blackbird  
 Walks around the feet  
 Of the women about you?

(p. 21)

Stevens employs musical terminology in stanza eight:

I know noble accents  
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms:  
 But I know, too,  
 That the blackbird is involved  
 In what I know.

(p. 21)

The two specific musical terms are both trochaic feet.

The repetition of the phrase, "I know," an iambic foot intermingled within the five line stanza, affects the flow certainly, but reveals something of greater significance. Perhaps the more subtle theme of this poem is stated by the poet as he utters: ". . . the blackbird is involved/ In what I know"(p. 21). One can "know" in many ways. Stevens' theme is varied through the blackbird's thirteen methods of involvement, some being superficial--others direct, intense.

The involvement to which the poet makes reference is one's awareness of his own life and his involvement in it. One must look beyond himself, outside himself, in order to truly know and understand himself. Stevens is focusing upon the blackbird, the common denominator of this poem, as a means of locating a focal point, a theme, to allow one to examine his own life.

Stanza nine continues the movement with the variation suggesting an uncomfortable possibility for the speaker.

When the blackbird flew out  
 of sight  
 It marked the edge  
 Of one of many circles.

(p. 21)

The blackbird flies "out of sight" marking "the edge of one of many circles." Circles suggest a broader scope and a variation not previously stated in this poem. Circles encompass a sphere beyond the confinement evident in the first nine stanzas. Although movement continues throughout, the movement does not suggest distance until this point.

Stevens' poetry is so intricate that careful attention is required in order to observe all musical references made within the context of musical form. Within the circular movement is revealed the use of the word "euphony." This pleasing effect is achieved through the internal rhyme of "sight" and "light."

At the sight of blackbirds  
 Flying in a green light,  
 Even the bawds of euphony  
 Would cry out sharply.

(p. 21)

Yet the variation is manifested through the contradiction expressed in the final two lines of the stanza. The green light represents the reality of the moment. The contradiction lies within the reaction of the bawds who cry out in fear or, at the very least, surprise. This figure of

speech Stevens selects proves a glaring reinforcement of the contradiction he employs. The bawds above all should understand the harshness of the real world though they deal in momentary fantasy. Even they are frightened by the blackbirds and what they represent. Pleasure is never secure. Harsh reality is incessant.

Stanza eleven presents the most imposing variation as it suggests a dismal image. The third person pronoun "he" begins a stanza filled with foreboding words:

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

(p. 21)

This stanza's variation is reminiscent of stanza one's suggestion concerning the existence of the literal eye and the mind's eye. The first three lines present a concrete picture of one riding in a carriage, while the final three illustrate an abstract one of an illusion created by a shadow.

The second two-line stanza offers relief to the reader through the forward motion it contains. The motion is achieved with assistance from the meter and precise word selection.

The river is moving,  
The blackbird must be flying.

(p. 22)

The thematic statement previously found in stanzas nine and

ten appears in this couplet. The blackbird is flying for the third and final time. The variation, however, does not divulge the bird's location or destination.

In the final stanza of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens returns to his theme originally stated in stanza one. The blackbird is once again motionless in a setting of snow.

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

(p. 22)

The variations which appear throughout this work culminate in the familiar setting closely akin to the first stanza. The theme is assisted in its resolution through the alliterative "s" and the internal rhyme of snowing/going. The snow is ultimately serene. "The blackbird sat" finally after his movement through eleven stanzas. Thus the black aspect of reality presented in this fear-provoking poem ends with a forceful, deafening silence.

For Stevens, there is no constant. Reality is temporary, changeable. There is the reality of the moment, but that reality is simply a vacuum until imagination projects its power. Through the blackbird, the imaginative powers create for the speaker and for the reader the reality of the inevitability of death. The helplessness and the emptiness the speaker feels as he examines thirteen variations of this

black reality are formidably perceived and imagined. So vivid is the experience that at one point, stanza ten, the speaker experiences a premonition of his own death.

Wallace Stevens' thematic contention involving the temporary state of reality adds to the eeriness of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." There is no consolation for the speaker in the reality of the moment. The blackbird reminds him that his moment is fleeting; death is impending.

## CHAPTER V

### PIED UMBRELLAS - POETRY OF SEA AND SKY: VARIATIONS IN "SEA SURFACE FULL OF CLOUDS"

The fourth and most ambitious example of the theme and variation is "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." Samuel French Morse calls this work the " . . . purest celebration of the poetry of sea and sky."<sup>1</sup> Lucy Beckett refers to this poem as a "virtuoso piece,"<sup>2</sup> one which displays technical skill in its musical performance.

Wallace Stevens made several successful attempts at the implementation of the theme and variation, as illustrated in this thesis. In this work, he draws upon his experience, his skill, and his musical knowledge to produce an example of precision in poetic content and musical form.

"Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is a five-section poem with each section comprised of six three line stanzas. The uniformity provides an extremely organized exterior from which to examine the underlying theme and the variations employed to strengthen it. This musical form allows Stevens the perfect vehicle to reveal his impressions of the interplay between the sea and the clouds above, resulting in his own "revelation of nature." The poem reflects the memory of

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<sup>1</sup>Morse, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Lucy Beckett, Wallace Stevens (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 95n.

a cruise and keen observations during the journey are relived in this most hopeful work. The theme is a celebration of one aspect of nature, specifically the arrival of morning, the beginning of a new day on the sea. Stevens obviously delights in the uniqueness of the dawning of each new day. Therefore, the interactions of the sea and the sky on five different mornings comprise the variations for this musical piece. Stevens is, once again, supporting his theme by viewing it from diverse angles on five individual occasions.

An overview of the thematic statement is provided by an excerpt from Stevens' "Effects of Analogy," the essence of which Samuel Morse feels is captured in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." So that his reader becomes totally involved in the result of his creativity, Stevens feels that the third reader of any text is

. . . one for whom the story and the other meaning should come together like two aspects that combine to produce a third, or, if they do not combine, inter-act, so that one influences the other and produces an effect similar in kind to the prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions.<sup>3</sup>

Section one of this well-designed work begins in such a way as to set the stage for the feeling of the poem. Each of the four remaining stanzas begins with either the same wording or a variation of that wording heralding the arrival of each individual day.

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<sup>3</sup>Morse, p. 199.

In that November off Tehuantepec,  
The slopping of the sea grew still  
one night

(p. 89)

The first morning is described as shading the deck of the ship as the speaker recalls ". . . rosy chocolate/And gilt umbrellas." Stevens and his poetry are consistently concerned with reality, as noted in previous chapters. The second stanza in section one refers to "paradisal green," a significant word choice considering the presumption that green is the color that Stevens equates to reality.

Paradisal green  
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine  
Of ocean

(p. 89)

The reality of ocean gives it poise in Stevens' estimation. This description of the machine, the ocean, depicts a "perplexed" body of water, perhaps a rough and unsettled sea. Subsequent variations illustrate the machine in varying yet effective descriptive terms.

The morning brings not only a glow to the sea but to the sea-clouds as well. Stevens compares the clouds to blooms as they each move in their respective elements.

The sea clouds whitened far below  
the calm  
And moved, as blooms move, in the  
swimming green  
And in its watery rediance, while  
the hue  
Of heaven in an antique reflection  
rolled

Round those flotillas. And sometimes  
                   the sea  
 Poured brilliant iris on the glistening  
                   blue.

(p. 89)

The pleasantness of the description is enhanced by the superb manner in which Stevens joins the reality of the situation with the imaginative forces it evokes. Blue represents the imagination for this poet; therefore, the thematic connection between reality and one's imagination is purposely achieved.

The reader, the listener, is immediately caught up in the thematic statement through the word choice, certainly, and through the alliteration and the metrical variations as well. Alliterative "s", "r", and "w" are prevalent. They are assisted in the musical flow by the iambic pentameter dominance with varying meters interspersed.

Section two begins with the familiar opening lines and the variation appearing in the third line of stanza one.

In that November off Tehuantepec,  
 The slopping of the sea grew still one night.  
 At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck

(p. 90)

The arrival of this second morning is not shaded as is the one depicted in the opening section. The "yellow" from the sunrise streaks rather than shades the deck. The basic images present in section one, stanza two, reappear here with noticeable variation in the description and, therefore, variation on the theme.

. . . yellow streaked the deck

And made one think of chop-house chocolate  
And sham umbrellas. And a sham-like green  
Capped summer-seeming on the tense machine

Of ocean

(p. 90)

The chocolate is no longer "rosy" but "chop-house" instead. Stevens retains the last word in each of the three lines of the second stanza in every section of the poem. This uniformity adds to the superb organization that assists in making this work extremely appealing. Stevens' variations occur through the descriptive words that precede each of the three end words. The "sham-like" green makes way for the "tense" machine. The ocean, the machine, lies in "sinister flatness."

The gongs announce the beginning of the day. Morning's arrival is heralded in section two, a distinct variation from the floating, subdued effect in section one.

The gongs rang loudly as the windy booms  
Hoo-hooded it in the darkened ocean  
The gongs grew still. And then the blue  
heaven spread . . .

(p. 90)

With the advent of the daylight comes the disappearance of the "macabre" uncertainty of darkness.

The familiar opening lines begin the third morning and make way for the variation that follows.

In that November off Tehuantepec,  
The slopping of the sea grew still one night

(p. 90)

This middle section of the poem is the only section in which the reader must search for the arrival of the day. The search is not an unpleasant one, however, because the images through the word choice Stevens employs prove rather delicate.

And a pale silver patterned on the deck

And made one think of porcelain chocolate  
And pied umbrellas. An uncertain green,  
Piano polished, held the tranced machine

Of ocean, as a prelude holds and holds.

(p. 90)

The dawning is not bright as in the two preceding sections. This morning arrives in an almost mysterious manner. The alliterative "p" enhances the flow of the emergence of this delicate morning. The ocean is viewed in a hypnotical state, leaving one to wonder if the light of day will arrive. The "silver petals of white blooms/Unfolding in the water" appear black as they are shrouded by the sea shadows. Happily, however, the morning appears as ". . . the rolling heaven made them (petals) blue, . . ." The clouds roll past eliminating the shadows, making way for a new morning.

Section three is an extremely important one in the development of the theme. The "uncertain green," the uncertain reality, holds the "tranced" ocean until the imagination, represented by the color blue, forces its way into the balance of the situation, of life itself. It is the

imagination that allows one to see in the ocean and the sky all of the clarity they possess through the augmentation of the initially stated theme. Stevens is creating a new day and thereby creating a new reality of the moment.

Wallace Stevens varies the repetitious opening lines in section four.

In that November off Tehuantepec  
The night-long slopping of the sea grew still  
(p. 91)

The morning dozes upon the deck. It has arrived, but its presence is not, as yet, felt. The descriptive "mallow" is first used in line three and is repeated twice for emphasis in the closing line of stanza six.

A mallow morning dozed upon the deck  
And made one think of musky chocolate  
And frail umbrellas. A too-fluent green  
Suggested malice in the dry machine  
(p. 91)

It is impossible to overlook the alliterative "m" the poet utilizes in stanza two. It enhances a rather disturbing image. One wonders at this point in section four if the imagination and the reality of the situation can come to terms. The "too-fluent" reality suggests ill will as the ocean ponders deception.

The questioning in stanzas three and four is appropriate to the situation and significant in the resolution, the arrival of the fourth day.

Who then behold the figures of the clouds  
Like blooms secluded in the thick marine

Like blooms?

(p. 91)

The comparison of the clouds to the ocean-blooms is suitable since the blooms are visible only when the clouds part to reveal the light of day.

But more suddenly the heaven rolled

Its bluest sea-clouds in the thinking green,  
And the nakedness became the broadest blooms,  
Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled.

(p. 91)

The new day arrives as the reality of the dawning meets and considers the imaginative thematic element.

The fifth and final section of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" begins with still another variation of the opening lines.

In that November off Tehuantepec  
Night stilled the slopping of the sea.

(p. 92)

The personification of "day" immediately discloses its arrival.

The day  
Came, bowing and voluble, upon the deck,  
Good clown.

(p. 92)

The image of a day is depicted as arriving on deck just as a clown arrives bowing and gesturing rapidly on a stage.

One thought of Chinese chocolate  
And a motley green  
Followed the drift of the obese machine

(p. 92)

The evolution of this final day has an air of optimism and joviality. Though the ocean is described as a lazy, obese object, the clown imagery continues throughout this section and eventually brings the sky and the sea into focus.

The independent clouds are first observed singularly; then they come together as a group.

The sovereign clouds came clustering. The conch  
Of loyal conjuration trumped.

(p. 92)

The alliterative "c" moves the theme forward toward a jubilant end.

Then the sea  
And heaven rolled as one and from the two  
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.

(p. 92)

The fifth new day arrives in happiness with an added revelation. Sea and the sky become one through the "transfigurings" of the imagination. The reality of the situation, the reality of the disappearance of darkness and the emergence of morning, is coupled with the imaginative powers the observer possesses. The result is an understanding of and an appreciation for the miracle of nature.

The momentary reality is evident in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" through a celebration of the imagination as it refreshes and regenerates life and nature. Focus on the sea and the clouds reveals a resemblance between them recognized

by virtue of the imaginative process. "Poetic insight draws heaven and sea into a unity."<sup>4</sup>

This final example of the theme-and-variation musical form represents a composite of all of the masterful strokes Stevens orchestrates throughout the four poems explicated in this study. While each poem discussed was chosen for its thematic statement, its structure, and its development and stands on its own merit, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" culminates the study because of its intricacy and hope. In this poem Stevens revels in the creation of each new momentous reality represented by the creation of each new day. The positive interaction of the imagination with the reality of the situation resounds throughout this magnificent illustration of the union of two art forms.

Wallace Stevens' message embraces the same imaginative process and intense realities present in the previously examined poems. The uniqueness lies within the departure from an ominous tone of impending death to a hopeful celebration of life.

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<sup>4</sup>Buttell, p. 218.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Ideas of Order, the title of one volume of Wallace Stevens' poetry, may best express the poet's motivation behind his work. His concern was not for recognition of his poetic achievement, but rather for perfecting his art.

Critics recognize and acknowledge Stevens' ability to excel in both the business world, as a vice president in the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and in the poetic world as a respected craftsman. They seldom ignore the intelligence he brings to both vocations, often referring specifically to the complexity of his poetry. It is through this complexity that Stevens challenges the reader to understand and come to terms with his ideas of order.

The poet perceives and reveals a correspondence between man's ideas and an order in nature. Through his poetry, he affords the reader an opportunity to experience the same revelation. It is through one facet of the intellectual competence Stevens brings to his poetry, specifically the utilization of his musical knowledge to augment his poetic impact, that the revelation may be shared. Stevens sees in music the creative power of mind over nature. Therefore, the integration of music with his

ideas of order results in a poetic experience that is both stimulating and enlightening.

Since the integration of music is deliberate and effective, critics refer to its presence. Some go beyond generalities by applauding Stevens' musicality. Others critique the thematic content and allude briefly to music. Regardless of the degree to which they choose to acknowledge the presence of music, none can ignore the poetic complexity. This complexity is achieved, in part by the manner in which Stevens states and restates his themes. His insistence upon maintaining a high level of difficulty in his poetry necessitates an examination of a theme from varying perspectives. He is not satisfied with simplistic thematic expressions. Rather, this poet chooses to state a theme, then develop it through a series of variations. Consequently, one particular musical form, theme and variation, perfectly suits Stevens' objectives and his talents.

Four specific poems explicated in this thesis adhere to the theme-and-variation form. Three of the four are rigidly structured by the Roman numerals which mark their divisions. The one lacking Roman numerals is structured by the precise divisions in the setting between the speaker's inside world and the outside world of the unknown. Once the divisions are drawn, the poet proceeds with his thematic statement and its development.

The manner in which Stevens achieves this end is nearly as diverse as his thematic material. Development is achieved through metrical variations, line and stanza variations, word form variations, word substitution, phrase substitution, and word and phrase repetition. These variations are enhanced by the musical terminology Stevens employs to describe or portray his characters.

The four poems examined in this study are individually creative achievements which collectively exemplify the theme-and-variation musical form. Observation of the four poems in the order written beginning with "Six Significant Landscapes" through "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" reveals progression with regard to the number of thematic variations and the degree of thematic development in each.

"Six Significant Landscapes" is divided into six sections, each of which illustrates Stevens' contention that we affect objects in nature, and they, in turn, affect us. Our moods governed by our emotions determine the reciprocal effect exemplified in the section. Stevens varies line length, meter, stanza length throughout. While this work is noted as an outstanding poetic effort, it lacks the degree of polish in theme and variation that the three remaining poems attain. As an early attempt, however, it reveals Stevens' creativity with a musical form.

"Domination of Black" explores the black aspects of reality through a speaker who has physically and mentally confined himself. His intense fear manifests distorted perceptions as he is no longer able to distinguish between imagination and reality.

Stevens succeeds at developing his theme by varying his stanza length and alternating stanzas between the inside and outside confines of the setting. Most effectively, he varies the word forms throughout. The word "turn" repeats in two alternate forms, "turned" and "turning", frequently enough to intensify the fear-provoking tone.

The theme present in "Domination of Black" is expanded in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This third poem examines the black aspects of reality by tracing the blackbird's movement through thirteen stanzas. The varying of both line and stanza length is initially visible. Word substitution, however, constitutes the strongest variation as Stevens changes the verbs used in conjunction with the "blackbird" to advance the theme. The blackbird's presence signifies the disconcerting reality that death is impending. The speaker can escape from neither the blackbird nor the inevitability of the reality it represents.

"Sea Surface Full of Clouds" combines many elements of development utilized in the three previously discussed poems. Precise section divisions mark the arrival of morning

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on five different days. These provide the framework around which Stevens celebrates the beauty and uniqueness of the dawns at sea he personally observed.

The format is uniform as the six three-line stanzas maintain a consistency from which internal variations occur. Word and phrase substitution as well as word and phrase repetition contribute to the uniqueness of each description. The celebration of life achieved through the speaker's awe at the dawning of each day illustrates a positiveness within the poet not previously observed. A merging of the reality of the situation in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" with the imaginative forces results in a hopeful revelation.

Interestingly, the musicality Wallace Stevens brings to his poetry is as effective in his revelation of the black aspects of reality as it is in his celebration of life. Stevens' desire "to make music of his own"<sup>1</sup> is realized through the deliberate implementation of his ideas of order and affords him deserved distinction among twentieth century American poets.

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<sup>1</sup>Morse, p. 65.

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