

Wallace Stevens' Repetitive Imagery in 'Sunday Morning'

Theresia Ninung Pandamnurani¹, R. Yohanes Rajaban²

Abstract:- This study attempts to identify and appraise the impressive quality of the repetitive imagery used by Wallace Stevens in his poem, "Sunday Morning." In the poem, Stevens uses various kinds of imagery but this study focuses only on the vividness of some which are used repetitively to convey his ideas. The study finds that Stevens is very subtle in creating appealing and effective imagery. He applies the same imagery in varied forms in different contexts so that the reoccurrence of an image may indicate an important development of ideas, moods, or attitudes.

Keywords:- Repetitive, imagery, varied, reoccurrence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens wrote "Sunday Morning" in 1914. This poem was first published in Poetry magazine in 1915 when he was 35 years old., some 41 years before his baptism into the Roman Catholic Church which took place shortly before his death. The poem is his argument against his youthful perception of traditional Christianity concerning the meaning of human existence.

The poet's age is an age of doubt when the rapid development in science and technology has to a large extent changed people's ways of life and ways of thinking. Life has become more and more secular; so, tends to measure anything scientifically. Rational young people like Stevens can hardly accept traditional notions such as heaven and eternity. Marie Borroff notes that "man had never imagined, nor can he imagine, any heaven but his perishing earth." (1963, 12). A man hardly comprehends that something may exist beyond space and time. It sounds abstract and difficult to imagine.

Stevens's poem, "Sunday Morning" is a poem which is concerned with man's effort to find a motive that may sustain life in an age of doubt. The poem is written due to what Stevens himself believes, that "a poem is the cry of its occasion." (McNamara, 1972, 16). A little picture of the occasion can be seen in Gordon D. Kaufmann's remarks as follows:

Modern man, more than the man of any other age, lives in a world from which God is absent, a genuinely secular world. Our forefathers had a sense of God's continuous providential guidance of history as a whole and their destinies in particular; they found their lives meaningful because they were lived within the context of God's purposes, each man having his unique place and task.' (1973, 41)

Stevens's poem, "Sunday Morning" implies the idea that man is wandering alone in the world. He is without the so-called God's guidance, but always with his own often painful thoughts about the nature of religious life. He has thoughts, ideas, and concerns, about God, life's destiny, or the destiny of man in the world, but is no longer has the old faith which used to provide him with guidance and a sense of destiny. Harold Bloom suggests that

In "Sunday Morning" Wallace Stevens starts where Keats started; God and the gods are dead, quite dead, but the Sublime survives anyway, and one of it survives in sympathy, and indeed, in self-sympathy." (1980, 28)

The poem reflects a modern person's effort in finding the meaning of his existence-- the value of whatever he does think, and feels at a time when traditional beliefs fail to provide a motive and tend to alienate man from natural life. The poem also demonstrates Stevens' conviction that poetry may help the reader deal with his life especially. According to Stevens, the poet's function is

not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination becomes the light in the mind of others. (1964, 91)

In other words, the poetic experience would help the reader arrive at a more objective, but also heartfelt knowledge of his own experience. Then, it is up to him to make use of the knowledge or not, because as David Daiches writes, "literacy itself is a means, not an end, and it can be put to use which may be good, bad, or indifferent." (1964, 7)

Stevens' rejection of traditional Christianity is only of secondary importance to the poem. His concern is not primarily with telling which religions should be kept, but with his conviction that an individual should have a heroic effort to live. Stevens believes that an individual's life is short. Every individual is responsible for his own life. As everyone will die. Stevens emphasizes the notion of death in one of his most impressive expressions in the poem, "death is the mother of beauty." The expression signifies how the awareness of death or the consciousness that anything and any being faces the possibility of extinction may lead an individual to make his life as meaningful as possible. In effect, the knowledge of death intensifies life's incessant beginning, as identified by Jung:

Those black waters of death are the water of life, for death with its cold embrace is the maternal womb, just as the sea devours the sun but brings it forth again (Kesler, 1972,.19)

Ambiguities like the one implied in Jung's statement occur many times in "Sunday Morning" and make the poem seemingly irreligious on the first reading. Expressions like "ancient sacrifice," "or "The tomb of Palestine/ Is not the porch of spirit lingering/ It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay," indeed may sound irreligious, or even anti-religious. Those ambiguities are not intentionally meant to mock devout believers but to tickle the dead feelings of the unbelievers or half-believers, to arouse their self-complacency.

The meditative form of the poem suggests that the poem is meant to be an internal debate or exploration into the nature of an individual's experience. The emphasis is on religiosity as a private rather than collective or political matter, which again reminds the reader of the poet's perception of modern life where man is alone, "unsponsored, free" without any help or interference from external or supernatural forces. The notion reminds the reader of the Transcendentalists who believe that "the height, the deity of man is to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force." (Atkinson, ed., 1950, .90)

II. STEVENS' REPETITIVE IMAGERY

One of the literary aspects of the meditative monologue is found in Steven's subtle use of literary devices, The poem, "Sunday Morning" is rich in imagery. Wallace Stevens makes his images appealing and strong by repeating them again and again in varied forms so that the reoccurrence of an image may indicate an important development of ideas, moods, or attitudes. Most of those images are concrete, natural, things that a reader can grasp with his or her senses. Thus, when such images connote abstract things, such as religiosity, those images let the reader grasp those abstract things not only with intellectual capacity but also with emotion, with the senses. In other words, such images render abstract things concrete. When images recur, their meanings, too, develop as they are enveloped in a different context. Stevens' repetition and variation of images will be discussed elaborately as they are central to the work's poetic design. The writer finds there are four kinds of repetitive images in the poem. Those are a)waterimage, b) fruitimage, c) birdimage, and d) ritualimage.

A. Water-image

In the first stanza of the poem, the waterimage appears as "wide water"and" sea." Thesea refers to an actual sea of whose shores the lyrical speaker, a woman, is having a recreation, sitting in a sunny chair and enjoying her late breakfast. Thus, the sea in the context is one of sensual, physical pleasure. But, a short time later, the sea is referred to as "wide water" and is associated with a spiritual realm, liberation, and death.

*She dreams a little and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe
As a calm darkens among water- lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings,
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound.
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulcher.*

(Stanza I, ll. 6-15)

The image of "wide water" in the passage is associated with some events told in the Bible. First, the sea turns into a magical seapath on which a dead body is carried to a burial place. Then the sea turns into another magical sea upon which the woman is walking while dreaming. Later it is revealed that the sea is the biblical Red Sea which the Israelites cross to free themselves from the bondage of the Egyptian Pharaoh. But then the last poem does not follow the liberation movement with freedom and arrival in a rejoicing Palestine; instead, the movement leads to a Palestine of silence and death. In the poem, it is not Jesus Christ who is walking the sea as the Bible says that Christ once walks upon a lake. It is not Christ either who dies in Palestine. The woman has taken the place of Christ. She is likened to Christ. She walks like Christ but is dead because she suffers a spiritual death.

In stanza six, Stevens has associated paradise with the rivers of Earth which are forever young and dynamic. The choice of riverimage is appealing, especially to describe paradise which is concrete and sensual, a paradise that could be attained in time. Further, Stevens also describes life as an everlasting flowing river and paradise as a sea. The comparison between life, eternity, and paradise is meant to remind the reader that paradise is an eternal process of becoming, like the rivers' effort to reach the seas "they never find." Paradise is a kind of ultimate perfection that would be attained at the end of time. But as time is essentially eternal, like space, one can never know when paradise will ultimately be realized. All one knows is that the present life is a point in the eternal process of perfection, thus one can say that this life, too, has to a certain extent attained some degree of perfection. Thud cannot wholly bad.

In Stanza seven, the waterimage recurs in the form of "dew."

*And when they come and wither they shall go
The dew upon their feet shall manifest.*

(Stanza VII, ll. 104-105)

The "feet" belong to a man, and the "dew" belongs to the physical world. When the dew manifests upon the feet, the physical world and man are in harmony with each other, instead of being alienated from one another. Furthermore, as "dew" is also a waterimage, which often symbolizes the spirit or rebirth, then the spiritual colors suffuse the physical. Thus, in this image one is presented with an ultimate triple harmony: man, the spiritual world, and the physical world.

The choice of dewimage is convincing because dew always appears in the morning, at the beginning of the day, or brings a sense of a new life, and will disappear soon as the sun rises. Therefore, it is said that the dew "shall manifest" upon their feet and becomes the spirit that will guide the individual in living her life. Man has this sense of destiny only when he or she has that ultimate sense of harmony.

B. Fruit-image

Wallace Stevens uses fruit-image in "Sunday Morning." In the very first stanza, Stevens uses the image of "oranges" to describe physical comfort or sensual satisfaction one may have enjoyed in his or her life. The oranges which are sweet and juicy, therefore desirable, are presented in the first stanza as an image of a worldly thing that in the context is oppressed or resented by the religious thought implied in the term "ancient sacrifice."

*Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.*

(Stanza I, ll. 1-5)

Later, in the second stanza, he describes them as "pungent fruit" which is very valuable because it is related to "things to be cherished like the thought of heaven."

*Shall she not find in the comfort of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?*

(Stanza II, ll. 19-22)

The 'pungent fruit' is a concrete thing that could be enjoyed at present. Its pungency gives comfort to the woman who is enjoying her summer vacation. Thus, it is both very desirable and valuable in the immediate present. In this passage, the use of this image is very effective, especially in strengthening Stevens' idea that heaven should be related to the present world and should have to do with the concrete and sensuous, thus it would be tangible and also graspable. Otherwise, to a rational mind heaven would simply exist as an abstract idea; it "can come only in shadows and dreams." If heaven is abstract, it will not appeal to the rational and materialistic mind. One knows how in modern life, religions wane, mostly because many ideas of God, heaven, godliness, etc., are abstract, not related to the world, and not manifested in concrete, worldly things, which tend to be regarded as worthless or sinful. To a rational mind, religiosity, to be appealing, has to regard the worldly, physical things, duly; the present life has to be an inseparable part of it. In thus talking about a Sunday morning, not in terms of going to church and saying prayers to keep an abstract mental contact with God, but in terms of concrete things which people daily experience, Stevens reminds the reader of the anguish of the modern man is losing his traditional belief which tends to separate the

physical from the spiritual. The evocative power of Stevens' images becomes stronger especially because he chooses images that are familiar to the reader but rarely thought about seriously and openly.

In stanza six, fruit-image recurs. In the passage, Stevens talks about paradise in terms of "ripe fruit that never falls." In the image a reader can sense a value that does not decay, hence is eternal. However, in this context, one can see that the fruit is not only imaginary. It is the fruit that the woman is eating. In this case, Stevens leads the reader to see and think of paradise and eternity not as something which exists beyond space and time, but as a condition that physically can be felt and already materialized at present. To see paradise as having taken form in the physical world as the present is seemingly the woman's wish to make sure that her worldly life is really meaningful. Further, Stevens intensifies the woman's wish with questions that imply pessimism, uncertainty, and worry.

*Why set the pears upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum.*

(Stanza VI, ll. 83-94)

Stevens makes the woman, in her pessimistic mood, think that whatever she is doing in her life is like setting a pear upon river -banks, or spicing the shore with odors of the plum. Pragmatically, it is a futile act. However, such images give the reader an indication of a man's need for certainty about the value of whatever he or she does or doing, thus the value of one's being a part of God, a part of heaven, a part of eternity...A reader sees the fruitimage in this part as very evocative to describe the woman's pessimistic feeling about the value of her experience in the world concerning the eternal process of becoming, which makes up the woman/s perception of what heaven is or can be.

C. Bird- image

Stevens uses birdimages, which often symbolize the spiritual, very often in this poem. In the very first stanza, there is a painted cockatoo with its ironical "green freedom." A cockatoo is a kind of parrot that can be trained to imitate human speech. It is not a very clever bird that it often imitates only a small number of words over and over. In this passage, the choice of cockatooimage is meant to make this woman's complacent routine life ironical.

Stevens presents this cockatoo as a free cockatoo with wings widely spread. Yet it is not free at all because the cockatoo is only a figurative painting. It seems that by choosing this image Stevens tries to suggest that the woman is not as free as she thinks she is. In this context a reader can see that the woman is sitting in her room on a Sunday morning, feeling satisfied with herself. Her complacency is then disturbed by the question of whether her comfort is real and meaningful. The inner disturbance implies that the woman's freedom, her self-complacency, is not a solid one, just like the cockatoo's freedom. The use of cockatoo-image in this passage is therefore appropriate to describe the woman's situation, the fact that she is uncomfortable with her complacency.

The birdimage recurs in the fourth stanza. In the stanza, the cockatoo is transformed into a bird that is no longer fixed, but birds which are ready to fly:

*She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings,
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"*

(Stanza IV, ll. 46-50)

The "wakened birds" are a development of the image of the "cockatoo." This image is powerful to show the development of the woman's mood. In this stanza, it seems that the woman herself is now like the birds. Her complacent spirit has indeed developed into a searching spirit, exploring questions of religious belief. As "wakened birds" may also be associated with morning, and morning always brings new hope, the image of swallows in this part, therefore, is very effective to describe that the woman is hopefully searching for a new, more meaningful life, which she associates with paradise.

The disappearance of paradise along with the disappearance of the birds is a very effective description. In real life, paradise can be said to "exist" only when one is conscious of it, only if one thinks of it, or when he feels it. However, one indeed rarely thinks about it; much oftener he is too occupied with his own petty, immediate, or practical concerns to think about heaven. Moreover, than not, one is just like the woman in the poem in being complacent, in doing anything not in accord with his religious principles consciously—if he has any such principles.

What is uncommon in Stevens is he does not use traditional images of the dove to define religiosity. Instead, he uses the cockatoo, swallows, and pigeons, to intensify the poem. The dove is known as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but as Stevens is dealing with an "earthly paradise" he prefers to use the images of cockatoos and swallows. But at the end of the poem, Stevens uses pigeons, which are similar to a dove but are stronger. The pigeons in the final stanza are the final transformation of the passively fixed cockatoo of the first stanza:

*And in the isolation of the sky,
In the evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulation as they sink
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*

(Stanza VIII, ll. 117-120)

The picture of the pigeons flying on extended wings into the dark with "its ambiguous undulation" is striking. Eventually, the woman's reverie ends not with a definite conclusion. She has to find any convincing belief or any substitute for it, on which she could base her search for a meaningful life. Whereas the poem opens with morning, it ends with the evening when darkness is prominent. This is ironic. However, whereas the poem opens with a cockatoo, it is concluded with pigeons flying into the dark "on extended wings." The latter picture is heroic though painful.

The belief that she is looking for turns out to be merely a conviction that she has to keep on searching for it and to keep hope alive. It means she has not failed. She has got her feat. In this searching spirit, one should remember what she said earlier:

*When the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?*

To the woman, then, paradise is alive because her searching spirit, too, is alive. Commenting on the last four lines, Marie E. Brown says:

The beauty of the movement of the pigeons lies in the fact that it is not cut off from the wide water, the darkness, which is inescapable, but is integrated with it; this movement occurs in the immediate present, but it is suffused with and haunted by, at one with, it is very opposite, the sense of the endlessness of darkness (1970, 160).

Through the image, Stevens tries to clarify the woman's heroic act, her willingness to go on living and searching for a meaningful life even though the present is dark because she believes that morning and light will always come again. It is a hope that makes the woman willing to keep on searching for paradise. Without hope every suffering will be unbearable, for hope, as Marie E. Brown says:

Is that stance of life toward a particular future that makes possible acceptance of its openness and the unknown as so threatening or simply uninteresting as to foretell all movement toward it (Brown, p. 162)

The use of bird images is therefore very subtle, efficient, and distinctive.

D. Ritual-image

In the very first stanza of the poem, Stevens depicts a woman as having a recreation on the seaside. The woman is described as sitting in her sunny room enjoying her late breakfast, which consists of coffee and oranges. The woman seems very relaxed and she is at the moment also enchanted by the decorative painting of a cockatoo:

*Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.*

Stanza I, ll. 1-5)

The woman's activities to please herself are transformed into an image of the ritual. Stevens skillfully creates this ritual image by juxtaposing the woman's activities and mood with the image carried by the term "holy hush of ancient sacrifice," creating the atmosphere of a Sunday Mass. Such a juxtaposition is possible because the woman prefers to be at home or in a hotel instead of going to church as she is conventionally supposed to be. In this case, Stevens is portraying a ritual that is very different from the ritual in Mass. Here the woman's ritual is secular and is

characterized by physical complacency. Stevens emphasizes this by choosing familiar and desirable things in daily life such as “peignoir,” “coffee and oranges,” and also “cockatoo” for the ritual instead of the images from the ritual in Mass such as the priest’s robe, the bread, and wine, or a choir. The image of ritual self-complacency in the passage is quite interesting and impressive especially to convey the idea that religiosity would be more appealing if it regards physical and concrete things highly and as an inseparable part of the spiritual world.

In stanza seven, Stevens creates another ritual image that is essentially different from the one found in the first stanza. In the passage, Stevens describes a group of people who are enjoying summer recreation on a beach. The activities of the people are associated with the primitive ritual;

*Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn.
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise;
Out of their blood, returning to the sky.*

(Stanza VII, ll. 91-95)

By the image of the primitive ritual, Stevens tries to convey a kind of ritual which is more intent than the woman’s ritualistic self-complacency, a ritual that contains both the secular and spiritual. Here Stevens describes an image of a “ring of men” who “chant in an orgy a summer morn/ their boisterous devotion to the sun” to clarify that their ritual is both physical and spiritual as they worship with their body and soul altogether. This is shown by the fact that the people or the “ring of men” conduct their worship or their devotion in a boisterous way which indicates that the worship is more heart-felt, more sincere, and more intent, simply because the physical or sensual becomes one with the spiritual, “out of the blood, returning to the sky.”

III. CONCLUSION

Wallace Stevens has subtly used imagery taken from nature to make ‘Sunday Morning’ an impressive expression of an individual’s serious need to hold a belief to sustain life in an era of doubt. The repetitive imagery used in the poem is very effective to support the poet in conveying his purpose.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Atkinson, Brooks. Ed..The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Modern Library: New York.1950.
- [2]. Bloom, Harold. Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate. Harvard University Press: Ithaca, New York. 1980.
- [3]. Borroff, Marie. Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays. Prentice Hill: Engelwoods Cliffs. 1963.

- [4]. Brown, Merle E..Wallace Stevens: RhwPowm as Act. Wayne State University Press: Detroit. 1970.
- [5]. Daiches, David. A Study of Literature. W.W. Norton: New York. 1964.
- [6]. Kaufman, Gordon D..God the Problem. Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1973.
- [7]. Kesler, Edward..Images of Wallace Stevens. Rutgers University Press. 1972.
- [8]. McNamara, Peter L..Critics On Wallace Stevens. University of Miami Press. 1972.
- [9]. Stevens, Wallace. The Necessary Angel. Alfred A. Knopf.: New York. 1964.