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Imagination, Reality and the Crisis of Being: An Existential Reading of Wallace Stevens's Poetic Vision

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between imagination, reality and human existence in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, focusing on the philosophical tensions that emerge between subjective consciousness and the external world. It investigates how Stevens challenges the assumption that reality can be experienced independently of human perception and explores the role of imagination in shaping individual understanding of existence. Drawing upon phenomenological and existential perspectives, particularly the philosophical contributions of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of selected poems, including The Snow Man, Anecdote of the Jar, The Idea of Order at Key West, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, The Man with the Blue Guitar and The Plain Sense of Things. Particular attention is given to the creative possibilities of imagination, the instability of subjective interpretations and the limitations of human attempts to establish a permanent order of reality. The analysis demonstrates that Stevens neither treats imagination as an escape from material existence nor regards external reality as entirely independent of human consciousness. Instead, his poetry presents an ongoing interaction between imaginative construction and the world that resists complete human understanding. The study argues that the crisis of being in Stevens's poetic vision emerges from this unresolved relationship: imagination remains indispensable to human experience, yet it cannot establish an absolute foundation for existence. It concludes that Stevens transforms the relationship between imagination and reality into a sustained philosophical inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of human consciousness.

Keywords- *Wallace Stevens; Imagination; Reality; Crisis of Being; Existentialism; Phenomenology; Human Consciousness; Subjective Perception; Modernist Poetry; Philosophical Imagination.*

Introduction — Imagination, Reality and the Modern Crisis of Being

The relationship between imagination and reality has remained one of the most persistent philosophical concerns of modern literature. The question is not simply whether human beings perceive the world as it exists, but whether their understanding of reality is ever independent of the consciousness through which they encounter it. In modern poetry, this problem acquires particular significance because the weakening of traditional religious and metaphysical certainties has made the relationship between the individual and the external world increasingly uncertain. Reality no longer appears as an entirely stable order waiting to be discovered; it is also experienced through individual perception, memory, language and imagination. This tension between the world as it exists and the world as human consciousness understands it provides an important point of entry into the poetry of Wallace Stevens. His poetic imagination repeatedly examines the possibility that human beings cannot experience reality without participating in its interpretation, although such participation does not necessarily give them complete control over the world.

Stevens's significance lies in the unusual balance he maintains between the imaginative mind and the external world. He neither accepts reality as something that can be understood through passive observation nor treats imagination as an unrestricted power capable of replacing material existence. In *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the*

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Imagination, he considers the relationship between these two dimensions central to the nature of poetry. His assertion that imagination must possess "the strength of reality or none at all" indicates that imaginative activity cannot retain its significance if it becomes completely detached from the world (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* 6). This observation provides an important foundation for understanding his poetic vision. Imagination does not simply invent an alternative world; it responds to reality, transforms the experience of it and makes possible new ways of understanding existence. The relationship is therefore reciprocal rather than oppositional.

This philosophical position becomes particularly important when considered in relation to the modern crisis of being. The crisis emerges from the difficulty of establishing a stable relationship between human consciousness and the world it seeks to comprehend. Individuals interpret their surroundings through inherited beliefs, personal experiences and imaginative constructions, yet these interpretations remain vulnerable to change. What appears meaningful from one perspective may become uncertain from another. John N. Serio identifies the continuous movement between reality and human response as an essential characteristic of Stevens's poetry, emphasising its openness to multiple perspectives, contradictions and changing interpretations (Serio, "Introduction"). Such instability is not merely a stylistic feature. It reveals a deeper philosophical difficulty: human beings seek an intelligible world, but the process through which they construct that intelligibility also exposes the limitations of their understanding.

The problem becomes especially visible in *The Snow Man*, where Stevens examines the possibility of perceiving the external world without imposing human emotions and expectations upon it. The poem's demand for a particular kind of consciousness challenges the assumption that reality can be understood through ordinary subjective experience. Its concluding expression, "the nothing that is," brings the reader face to face with the difficulty of distinguishing material existence from the meanings human beings attach to it (Stevens, "The Snow Man"). The poem does not establish that imagination is unnecessary; rather, it exposes the difficulty of separating perception from the consciousness that makes perception possible. Reality may possess an existence beyond human interpretation, but its significance for human beings remains inseparable from the conditions of knowing.

A different dimension of this relationship appears in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. Here, the accusation that the artist does not reproduce things as they are becomes the starting point for an extended examination of artistic representation and the transformation of experience. The statement "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" expresses the unavoidable intervention of imagination in the representation of reality (Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"). Yet the poem does not offer an uncomplicated defence of artistic freedom. The musician's imaginative transformations remain connected to the world that provokes them. Ian Tan's study of the poem's relationship with artistic mediation similarly draws attention to the tension between imaginative order and the independent character of phenomenal reality (Tan 112–22). Stevens thus raises a question that extends beyond artistic representation: if human beings understand the world through imaginative and perceptual processes, how can they distinguish between the reality they encounter and the meanings they construct around it?

The philosophical implications of this question become clearer when Stevens's poetry is approached through phenomenology and existential thought. Martin Heidegger's examination of human existence offers a useful framework for considering the relationship between being and the world, particularly because existence cannot be understood independently of the conditions within which human beings experience it (Heidegger). Similarly, Edmund Husserl's emphasis on intentional consciousness draws attention to the relationship between the knowing subject and the objects of experience (Husserl). These philosophical perspectives are relevant not because Stevens reproduces their theoretical positions, but because they illuminate the difficulty of treating consciousness and reality as entirely separate domains. Stevens's poetry makes this relationship an imaginative and existential problem. His concern is not merely what the world is, but how the world becomes meaningful to a consciousness that can never completely transcend its own conditions of perception.

Critical scholarship has already recognised the centrality of this relationship in Stevens's poetic achievement. Joseph N. Riddel, in his discussion of the visibility of thought, identifies imagination as a force capable of bringing the

individual and the external world into a meaningful relationship (Riddel 482–98). Simon Critchley's *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* also provides an important philosophical perspective on Stevens's engagement with reality and the limitations of human understanding. Joshua Kotin's examination of Stevens's philosophical position further demonstrates how poetry becomes a possible source of value in a secular world (Kotin). These critical approaches establish a substantial foundation for understanding Stevens's poetic philosophy. The present study builds upon this scholarship by examining the crisis of being through the interdependence of imagination, perception and external reality, with particular attention to the instability that emerges when imaginative constructions encounter the limitations of the material world.

Employing qualitative textual analysis and philosophical close reading, this paper examines selected poems, including *The Snow Man*, *Anecdote of the Jar*, *The Idea of Order at Key West*, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* and *The Plain Sense of Things*. Its central argument is that Stevens presents imagination as an indispensable dimension of human engagement with reality, but not as an independent authority capable of determining the nature of existence. Imagination creates relationships, establishes provisional orders and transforms perception; nevertheless, it remains answerable to a world that exceeds individual consciousness. The resulting tension constitutes the crisis of being in his poetry. By investigating this tension, the study seeks to demonstrate that Stevens's poetic vision offers neither a complete separation between imagination and reality nor their effortless reconciliation. Instead, it presents human existence as an ongoing negotiation between the world encountered and the world imaginatively understood.

The Crisis of Reality — Perception, Consciousness and the Limits of Human Understanding

The relationship between human consciousness and external reality becomes particularly problematic in Wallace Stevens's poetry when the individual attempts to distinguish the world as it exists from the world as it is experienced. Human beings ordinarily assume that perception provides direct access to reality. Yet perception is never entirely independent of the mind's expectations, emotions and interpretative habits. The difficulty, therefore, lies not simply in understanding the external world but in recognising how consciousness participates in the construction of what is understood as real. Stevens repeatedly examines this difficulty, questioning whether individuals can encounter reality without imposing upon it the meanings generated by their own minds. His poetry does not deny the existence of an external world; rather, it explores the limitations of human attempts to comprehend that world through apparently objective observation.

The Snow Man provides one of the most concentrated poetic explorations of this problem. The winter landscape initially appears to offer an opportunity for observing nature in its unmediated form. However, Stevens gradually makes the act of perception itself the central subject of the poem. The opening condition, “One must have a mind of winter,” establishes that the perception of reality requires a particular transformation of consciousness (Stevens, “The Snow Man”). The observer must temporarily relinquish the emotional associations through which ordinary human experience interprets the natural world. The difficulty is that human beings generally understand their surroundings through familiar psychological responses. Winter, for instance, may suggest loneliness, suffering or desolation, but these associations belong to human consciousness rather than necessarily to the landscape itself.

The poem's insistence upon perceiving without projecting human misery upon nature consequently raises a fundamental philosophical question: is it possible to encounter reality without the intervention of subjective consciousness? Stevens does not provide an uncomplicated affirmative answer. The demand for a mind capable of observing the world without emotional interference suggests an almost impossible discipline of perception. Even the attempt to eliminate subjective interpretation involves a conscious effort on the part of the observer. The individual cannot easily step outside the conditions through which the world becomes intelligible. The concluding phrase, “the nothing that is,” intensifies this difficulty by bringing the reader towards a reality that appears to resist familiar human meanings (Stevens, “The Snow Man”). The phrase should not be understood simply as a declaration that existence is

meaningless. Rather, it draws attention to the possibility that the world possesses an independent material presence that cannot be fully contained within human interpretations.

This distinction is important because Stevens does not reduce reality to subjective imagination. The external world remains capable of resisting the meanings individuals assign to it. At the same time, the world as experienced cannot be separated completely from the consciousness through which it is perceived. In this respect, the poem opens a productive philosophical dialogue with phenomenology. Edmund Husserl's understanding of intentional consciousness emphasises that consciousness is always directed towards something; perception involves a relationship between the experiencing subject and the object of experience (Husserl). Although Stevens does not formulate a phenomenological theory, *The Snow Man* dramatises a related difficulty by questioning whether the observing mind can encounter the world without carrying its own interpretative structures into that encounter.

A different but complementary dimension of the crisis of reality emerges in *Anecdote of the Jar*. Here, Stevens examines the relationship between humanly created order and the apparent independence of the natural world. The placement of an ordinary jar in the wilderness gradually transforms the relationship between the object and its surroundings. The jar becomes a point of organisation within a landscape that previously appeared without any recognisable human arrangement (Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar”). Its presence changes the way the surrounding environment is perceived, suggesting that the experience of reality is influenced by the objects and structures through which human beings organise their world.

The significance of the jar, however, cannot be understood simply as a celebration of the mind's ability to impose order upon disorder. Its apparent authority over the wilderness is accompanied by an equally important sense of artificiality. The jar establishes a centre, but it does not become organically connected with the life surrounding it. Stevens emphasises this limitation through the observation that it “did not give of bird or bush” (Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar”). The object may reorganise the appearance of its surroundings, but it cannot reproduce the vitality of nature. Its authority is therefore both creative and restrictive. It demonstrates the capacity of humanly constructed forms to influence perception while simultaneously exposing their inability to encompass the fullness of external existence.

This ambiguity complicates the conventional interpretation of the poem as an uncomplicated victory of imagination over nature. The jar's dominance may represent the human desire to establish intelligible structures within an unfamiliar world, but the order it creates carries the possibility of impoverishing the very reality it seeks to organise. John N. Serio's discussion of Stevens's poetic imagination is relevant here because it draws attention to the instability of the relationship between reality and the human response to it (Serio, “Introduction”). The jar does not simply transform the wilderness; it also reveals the limitations of the transforming power. The external world remains more expansive than the artificial order imposed upon it. Consequently, *Anecdote of the Jar* raises a question that is central to the present investigation: whether the human desire to make reality intelligible inevitably involves reducing its complexity.

The relationship between these two poems becomes especially significant when considered together. In *The Snow Man*, the individual confronts the possibility of perceiving reality without the interference of subjective imagination. In *Anecdote of the Jar*, the humanly constructed object appears to exercise an organising influence over the natural environment. The poems therefore present two contrasting movements: the attempt to withdraw the self from its interpretative habits and the attempt to establish order through humanly created forms. Neither movement offers a completely satisfactory solution. The first exposes the difficulty of separating consciousness from perception, while the second reveals the limitations of imposing imaginative order upon an independent world. Stevens consequently avoids privileging either subjective consciousness or external reality as a completely sufficient explanation of human experience.

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This tension also invites a qualified engagement with Martin Heidegger's understanding of being-in-the-world. Heidegger challenges the assumption that human existence can be adequately understood by separating an observing subject from an external object. Human beings exist through their involvement with the world rather than as detached consciousnesses examining it from outside (Heidegger). Stevens's poems do not reproduce Heidegger's philosophical system, but they illuminate a related difficulty. The individual cannot simply withdraw from the world to discover an entirely objective reality, nor can the individual construct a world whose meaning is independent of external conditions. Existence emerges through this continuing relationship between consciousness and what lies beyond it.

The crisis of reality in Stevens's poetry, therefore, is not a question of choosing between imagination and the external world. It arises from the impossibility of establishing a final hierarchy between them. Human consciousness requires imaginative structures to interpret experience, yet those structures remain limited by realities that cannot be completely absorbed into individual perception. The philosophical importance of *The Snow Man* and *Anecdote of the Jar* lies in their presentation of this unresolved relationship. Both poems expose the inadequacy of absolute claims: the claim that reality can be perceived without subjective mediation and the claim that imagination can establish a complete order over the world. Stevens's poetic vision instead recognises the limitations of both positions. This understanding provides the foundation for examining imagination as a creative force through which human beings negotiate, rather than eliminate, the uncertainties of existence.

Imagination and the Construction of Being — The Human Mind as a Creative Force

If the relationship between consciousness and external reality remains uncertain, the question that follows concerns the role of imagination in making human experience intelligible. In Wallace Stevens's poetry, imagination is not simply an artistic faculty through which individuals produce images or escape from the limitations of ordinary existence. It represents a more fundamental human capacity to organise experience, establish relationships with the external world and create forms of significance within an otherwise uncertain reality. The importance of imagination, therefore, extends beyond the boundaries of artistic expression. It becomes closely connected with the manner in which human beings understand their existence. Stevens recognises that the world cannot be reduced to the meanings individuals construct around it; nevertheless, the world as experienced acquires much of its human significance through the activity of consciousness. His poetry explores this relationship without suggesting that either imagination or external reality can independently provide a complete understanding of existence.

This understanding receives one of its most sustained expressions in *The Idea of Order at Key West*. The poem presents a woman singing beside the sea, but its philosophical significance emerges from the distinction between the natural sounds of the ocean and the imaginative order created through her voice. The sea possesses its own movements and sounds, yet the woman's song transforms the experience of listening into an act of artistic and intellectual recognition (Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”). The speaker's observation that “She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang” establishes the creative importance of the human imagination (Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”). The singer does not merely reproduce the surrounding landscape; she establishes an order through which the landscape becomes meaningful to those who listen.

The term *artificer* is particularly significant because it suggests deliberate creative activity rather than passive observation. The woman becomes the maker of an imaginative world, but that world does not exist independently of the sea that surrounds her. Her song derives its significance from its relationship with the natural environment, even as it transforms the listener's experience of that environment. Stevens thus avoids presenting imagination and reality as mutually exclusive categories. The creative mind does not simply defeat nature, nor does nature render human imagination unnecessary. Instead, the two remain in a continuing relationship through which human experience acquires form and significance. Kevin Keane's study of the relationship between imagination and reality in Stevens's poetry similarly emphasises that these dimensions are interconnected rather than permanently opposed (Keane).

The poem's concluding reference to the “maker's rage to order words of the sea” further develops this understanding (Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”). The desire to establish order is not merely an aesthetic preference; it reflects a fundamental human impulse to make the world intelligible. Individuals seek patterns through which apparently disconnected experiences can become part of a comprehensible whole. Yet Stevens's use of the word *rage* also suggests that this activity is accompanied by a recognition of its difficulty. The world does not necessarily present itself in forms that correspond to human expectations. Imagination must therefore remain active, continually responding to the complexity of existence rather than assuming that it has achieved a final and unquestionable order.

A different but equally revealing dimension of imaginative construction appears in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*. Unlike the sustained dramatic situation of *The Idea of Order at Key West*, this poem consists of thirteen short sections, each presenting the blackbird within a different perceptual or imaginative context. The bird appears in relation to landscape, movement, weather, human relationships and the changing conditions of consciousness (Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”). The poem's structure itself becomes an argument about the plurality of experience. A single object does not necessarily produce a single, permanent meaning; its significance changes according to the perspective from which it is encountered.

The importance of this multiplicity becomes particularly evident in the ninth section, where the blackbird's disappearance marks “the edge / Of one of many circles” (Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”). The image suggests that perception is never entirely final. Each perspective establishes a particular boundary of understanding, but that boundary does not exhaust the possibilities of experience. The blackbird's movement becomes a reminder that reality exceeds any single act of observation. The poem consequently resists the assumption that human consciousness can establish one definitive interpretation of the world.

The poem's treatment of multiplicity also complicates the relationship between imagination and objective reality. The blackbird remains a recognisable presence throughout the sequence, but its significance changes as the perspectives shift. Stevens does not suggest that the bird becomes an entirely different physical object in each section. Rather, he demonstrates how the experience of an object changes through the imaginative and perceptual activity of the observer. This distinction is important because it prevents the poem from being interpreted as a denial of external reality. The blackbird exists beyond the individual descriptions, but its place within human experience is continually reconstructed. Helen Vendler's discussion of Stevens's multiple perspectives draws attention to this formal and philosophical complexity, particularly the way the poem resists a single, authoritative viewpoint (Vendler). Imagination, in this sense, becomes a means of recognising the plurality of reality rather than imposing a uniform interpretation upon it.

The relationship between imagination and existence becomes even more interesting when considered through the philosophical concept of consciousness. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger challenges the idea that human beings exist as detached observers standing outside the world they seek to understand. Human existence is fundamentally situated within a world of relationships, activities and possibilities (Heidegger). Stevens's poetry offers a distinctively imaginative exploration of a related problem. The individual does not encounter reality as an entirely passive observer; perception involves an active relationship with the surrounding world. Nevertheless, the individual cannot claim complete authority over that world. Imagination creates possibilities of understanding, but those possibilities remain connected to circumstances that exceed the control of consciousness.

This tension also recalls Sartre's discussion of imagination as an activity through which consciousness relates itself to what is absent, possible or not immediately present (Sartre). Although Stevens's poetic vision cannot be reduced to Sartrean philosophy, the comparison helps clarify why imagination is central to his representation of human existence. The imaginative mind does not merely accept the world in its existing form; it also considers what the world might become through alternative perceptions and interpretations. Human consciousness consequently remains open to possibilities that extend beyond immediate experience. Yet these possibilities do not establish an entirely independent reality. They remain connected to the material and experiential conditions from which imagination takes its direction.

The significance of Stevens's imaginative vision, therefore, lies in its recognition that human beings require more than passive awareness of their surroundings. They seek relationships, patterns and structures through which existence can become meaningful. *The Idea of Order at Key West* demonstrates this process through artistic creation, while *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* reveals it through the plurality of perception. Both poems suggest that imagination participates in the construction of human experience, but neither presents imaginative activity as an unlimited power. The world remains capable of resisting individual interpretations, and every imaginative order remains open to reconsideration. Imagination is thus neither a substitute for reality nor a final solution to the crisis of being. It is the means through which human consciousness continually negotiates its relationship with an external world that can never be completely possessed or understood.

The Instability of Being — Imagination, Change and the Fragmentation of Reality

The creative power of imagination in Wallace Stevens's poetry is accompanied by an equally significant recognition of its limitations. Although imagination enables human beings to establish relationships with the external world and create meaningful structures of experience, it cannot permanently secure the reality it seeks to interpret. The meanings produced through imaginative activity remain subject to change, contradiction and eventual displacement. This instability becomes particularly important when considering Stevens's understanding of human existence. If individuals experience the world through changing perceptions and imaginative constructions, the foundations upon which they establish their understanding of reality can never be entirely permanent. The crisis of being consequently emerges not only from the difficulty of knowing the external world but also from the instability of the imaginative structures through which human beings attempt to understand it.

This problem receives an extensive treatment in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. The poem begins with a conflict between the artist's imaginative transformation of reality and the audience's demand for an accurate representation of things. The listeners insist that the musician should play a tune representing things exactly as they are, while the guitarist responds through an imaginative act that alters their appearance (Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”). The declaration, “Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar,” establishes the central conflict between artistic representation and external reality (Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”). The guitar becomes an instrument through which the artist transforms experience, but this transformation also raises questions about the authority and limitations of imagination.

The significance of the poem lies in its refusal to provide a simple defence of artistic freedom. Stevens recognises that imagination cannot reproduce reality without changing it, but he also questions whether an entirely unmediated representation of reality is possible. The artist's task is not simply to copy the external world; it is to discover forms through which experience can be reconsidered. Yet the imaginative transformation of reality carries its own difficulty. If the artist becomes excessively absorbed in the world created through imagination, the external world may gradually lose its independent significance. The poem therefore explores a tension between creative freedom and the responsibility to recognise what remains beyond the artist's control.

Ian Tan's study of the relationship between artistic mediation and reality in Stevens's poem provides a particularly useful critical perspective. Tan examines how the aesthetic frame can impose its own order upon phenomenal reality while simultaneously encountering the limits of its ability to absorb the otherness of the world (Tan 112–22). This interpretation is important because it moves the discussion beyond the conventional opposition between artistic imagination and realistic representation. The problem is not simply that imagination changes reality; rather, the difficulty arises when the imaginative subject assumes that the transformed world can become a complete substitute for external existence. Stevens's guitarist remains engaged in this unresolved relationship. His artistic activity is necessary, but its authority cannot be absolute.

The poem's continuing movement between the musician's voice and the responses of his listeners further reinforces this instability. Reality is not presented as a fixed object that can be conclusively described through a single

imaginative act. Instead, the poem repeatedly revisits the relationship between the world and its artistic interpretation. Each new movement modifies the preceding perspective, suggesting that imaginative understanding is necessarily provisional. The crisis of being, therefore, becomes inseparable from the instability of representation itself. Human beings require imaginative constructions to understand their existence, yet they must also recognise that these constructions cannot permanently settle the meaning of the world.

A more unsettling examination of this problem appears in *The Plain Sense of Things*, where Stevens considers the possibility that the imaginative structures through which human beings understand reality may eventually lose their former authority. The poem begins with the suggestion that it is as though humanity has reached the end of imagination. Its opening observation, “After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things,” introduces a landscape in which the familiar richness of imaginative experience appears to have diminished (Stevens, “The Plain Sense of Things”). The seasonal setting is important because the falling leaves suggest the disappearance of forms that once gave the environment its fullness and coherence. What remains is an apparently reduced world, stripped of many of the associations through which it was previously understood.

The statement that “A fantastic effort has failed” further intensifies this sense of imaginative exhaustion (Stevens, “The Plain Sense of Things”). The failure is not necessarily that of one particular artistic undertaking; it may also suggest the limitations of the larger human effort to impose an enduring imaginative order upon existence. The poem's reference to the transformation of a great structure into a minor house reinforces the impression that an earlier vision has lost its authority. The individual is left to confront a world that no longer corresponds to the imaginative expectations previously attached to it. In this situation, the crisis of being becomes particularly visible because the structures through which existence was understood appear incapable of sustaining themselves.

Yet the poem's treatment of imaginative failure is more complicated than its opening lines initially suggest. The apparent exhaustion of imagination is itself expressed through an imaginative act. Stevens writes that even “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (Stevens, “The Plain Sense of Things”). This observation introduces a significant paradox. Human consciousness cannot easily establish a position entirely outside imagination, even when it attempts to recognise the limitations or disappearance of imaginative activity. The desire to encounter things in their plain material presence still requires an act of perception and representation. The poem thus questions whether reality can ever become completely independent of the imaginative processes through which human beings approach it.

The final images of the poem deepen this philosophical uncertainty. The pond, its water, the lilies and the imagined perspective of the rat suggest an attempt to move beyond the reflective structures of ordinary human consciousness. Nevertheless, this alternative perspective must itself be imagined. The plain sense of the world is therefore not presented as an uncomplicated truth available once imagination disappears. It remains an experience that human consciousness can approach only through its own limited resources. A recent discussion of the poem in *The New Wallace Stevens Studies* similarly emphasises the tension between the finite capacities of human imagination and a reality that remains partly inaccessible to it (Eeckhout and Han). The poem's philosophical importance lies in recognising both sides of this relationship: imagination cannot encompass the whole of reality, but human beings cannot simply abandon imagination to gain unrestricted access to the world.

This recognition also complicates the idea that the crisis of being can be overcome through a return to objective reality. The plainness of things does not automatically provide a secure foundation for human existence. Even when familiar imaginative constructions weaken, the individual must continue to interpret and negotiate the world. The disappearance of an earlier order may produce a sense of intellectual and existential disorientation, but it can also make possible a more attentive engagement with material existence. Stevens does not suggest that the loss of imaginative certainty is necessarily liberating. Rather, he reveals the difficulty of inhabiting a world in which neither imaginative construction nor the supposedly unmediated presence of things offers a final answer.

The relationship between these two poems reveals an important development in Stevens's understanding of imagination and existence. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* examines the artist's attempt to transform reality through imaginative expression, whereas *The Plain Sense of Things* considers what happens when the imaginative structures that once sustained human understanding begin to weaken. The first poem foregrounds the creative possibilities of imagination; the second exposes its limitations and the difficulty of moving beyond it. Together, they demonstrate that imaginative constructions are neither permanent nor entirely independent of the external world. Human beings continually revise their understanding of existence because the relationship between consciousness and reality remains unsettled.

The philosophical implications of this position can be considered alongside Heidegger's understanding of human existence as fundamentally situated within a world that cannot be reduced to an object of detached observation (Heidegger). Stevens's poetry similarly resists the assumption that the individual can establish an entirely independent position from which reality may be comprehended in its totality. Nevertheless, Stevens places particular emphasis on the imaginative processes through which individuals interpret and reconstruct their experience. His concern is not to demonstrate that reality is merely subjective, but to show that human understanding remains limited by the changing relationship between consciousness and the world.

The crisis of being in Stevens's poetry therefore emerges from a double recognition. On the one hand, imagination is indispensable because it enables individuals to organise experience and establish meaningful relationships with their surroundings. On the other hand, imaginative constructions remain provisional because external reality exceeds the interpretations imposed upon it. The individual cannot permanently secure existence through imagination, nor can the abandonment of imagination provide unrestricted access to an independent reality. This unresolved condition gives Stevens's poetic vision its philosophical depth. His poetry does not offer a final reconciliation between imagination and reality; it examines the continuing human effort to negotiate their relationship despite the limitations of both.

Negotiating Reality and Existence — The Philosophical Significance of Stevens's Imaginative Vision

The philosophical significance of Wallace Stevens's poetry ultimately rests upon his refusal to establish a permanent hierarchy between imagination and reality. Throughout his poetic career, Stevens examines the human desire to understand the world through imaginative structures while remaining conscious that reality cannot be entirely contained within those structures. Imagination enables individuals to interpret their surroundings, establish relationships and discover forms of order within experience. Yet the external world continually exceeds the meanings imposed upon it. This tension becomes central to Stevens's understanding of human existence because it reveals the limitations of both imaginative construction and supposedly objective perception. The crisis of being, therefore, does not arise simply because individuals cannot discover an unchanging reality; it emerges from their continuing need to negotiate a relationship between the world they encounter and the world they construct through consciousness.

Stevens's theoretical reflections in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* provide an important foundation for understanding this position. His insistence that imagination and reality are mutually dependent challenges the assumption that artistic creation must necessarily move away from the material world. Imagination derives its strength from its engagement with reality, while reality becomes meaningful to human experience through imaginative perception (Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*). This relationship is neither a complete identification of the two nor an absolute separation between them. Rather, Stevens recognises that imaginative activity must remain responsive to the world it seeks to interpret. The importance of this position lies in its rejection of two extreme possibilities: that reality can be understood without the intervention of consciousness, and that imagination can independently determine the nature of existence.

This understanding also clarifies the philosophical movement across the poems examined in the preceding instalments. *The Snow Man* exposes the difficulty of separating perception from subjective consciousness, while *Anecdote of the Jar* demonstrates how humanly constructed forms can organise the experience of the natural world without completely

encompassing it. *The Idea of Order at Key West* presents imagination as a creative activity through which experience acquires coherence, and *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* reveals the plurality of perspectives through which a single object becomes meaningful. In *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, artistic transformation exposes the tension between imaginative freedom and the demand of external reality, whereas *The Plain Sense of Things* considers the limitations of imaginative structures when their former authority begins to disappear. These poems collectively suggest that Stevens's understanding of existence is founded upon a continuing interaction between imaginative possibilities and the conditions that limit them.

The philosophical dimensions of this relationship become more apparent when Stevens is read alongside Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's understanding of being-in-the-world challenges the assumption that human beings exist as detached observers who can examine reality from a completely independent position. Human existence is already situated within a world of relationships, experiences and possibilities (Heidegger). Stevens approaches a related problem through poetic imagination, although his method remains distinctively literary. His poems suggest that individuals cannot establish a meaningful relationship with reality simply by withdrawing from subjective experience. Nor can they assume that their imaginative interpretations provide complete knowledge of the world. Existence is encountered through this continuing involvement between consciousness and its surroundings.

Ian Tan's *Wallace Stevens and Martin Heidegger: Poetry as Appropriative Proximity* offers particularly important support for this interpretation. Tan examines how Stevens's poetic language opens new possibilities for understanding Being, consciousness and the relationship between human subjectivity and the world (Tan). His approach is valuable because it moves beyond treating Stevens's poetry as an illustration of philosophical concepts. Instead, it recognises that poetic language itself can become a means of investigating questions that conventional philosophical argument may not fully resolve. Stevens's poetry acquires its philosophical importance through its ability to bring the reader into an imaginative encounter with the conditions of existence.

A further dimension of this argument emerges through phenomenology. Ariane Mildenberg's reassessment of phenomenology in Stevens's poetry emphasises the importance of intentionality and the inseparable relationship between consciousness and the world (Mildenberg 133–54). This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it prevents the relationship between imagination and reality from being reduced to a simple opposition between subjective invention and objective existence. Human consciousness is always directed towards a world that it encounters, interprets and attempts to understand. The significance of imagination lies in its participation in this relationship rather than in its ability to replace external reality.

Nevertheless, Stevens does not present imaginative activity as an entirely secure foundation for human existence. The world remains capable of resisting the interpretations through which individuals attempt to comprehend it. The failure of an imaginative order in *The Plain Sense of Things* is especially revealing in this respect. It demonstrates that the structures through which human beings establish coherence may lose their authority, leaving existence exposed in its ordinary and sometimes unsettling material presence. Such moments prevent Stevens's poetry from becoming an uncomplicated celebration of imagination. The creative mind remains necessary, but its constructions must continually be reconsidered in the light of changing experience.

This recognition also distinguishes Stevens from interpretations that place imagination above reality as an independent creative authority. His poetic vision is more accurately understood through the principle of interdependence. Ellwood Johnson's discussion of Stevens's transforming imagination similarly identifies the reciprocal relationship between the imaginative subject and an external reality that cannot be entirely determined by human consciousness (Johnson). The importance of this relationship is that it allows Stevens to acknowledge both the creative possibilities of human perception and the independent character of the world. Imagination transforms experience, but it does not possess the power to eliminate the conditions that make such transformation necessary.

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The central argument of this paper, therefore, is that Stevens presents the crisis of being as an unresolved negotiation between imaginative consciousness and external reality. Human beings cannot experience the world without interpreting it, yet their interpretations remain limited by realities that exceed individual understanding. Imagination makes existence intelligible without making it completely knowable. This distinction is essential because it prevents the study from treating Stevens's poetry either as an expression of subjective idealism or as an uncomplicated acceptance of objective material reality. His poetic vision occupies the difficult intellectual space between these positions, recognising that human existence requires imaginative participation while acknowledging the limitations of that participation.

Ultimately, Stevens's contribution to modern philosophical poetry lies in his ability to transform the relationship between imagination and reality into a sustained inquiry into the nature of human existence. His poetry does not provide a final answer to the question of what reality is, nor does it establish imagination as an infallible means of discovering truth. Instead, it reveals how human consciousness continually negotiates the relationship between what exists and what can be understood, perceived or imaginatively constructed. The crisis of being consequently remains unresolved, but it is not without intellectual or creative possibility. Stevens suggests that the value of human existence lies partly in this continuing engagement with a world that cannot be completely possessed through thought or imagination. His poetry thus offers a distinctive understanding of being: not as a fixed condition secured by absolute knowledge, but as an ongoing encounter between consciousness, imagination and the independent reality of the world.

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