

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

A High-Toned Old Christian Woman (1923)

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
Madame, we are where we began. Allow,
Therefore, that in the planetary scene
Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

ANALYSIS

“A businessman dressed in a harlequin costume and playing on a blue guitar might serve as an image for Wallace Stevens. As vice-president of a Hartford insurance company and as poet he lived a double life, and as a poet he wore the costume of a clown, though his favorite theme was the aesthetic imagination, as symbolized by a blue guitar.

In this poem Stevens wears his harlequin suit but has traded his guitar for a saxophone. Though his subject is very serious, he treats it in the spirit of comedy. Briefly, he is engaged in debate with a ‘high-toned old Christian woman’ on the comparative merits of religion and art as aids to the spiritual life. Since his opponent in this debate is *high*-toned and solemn, Stevens is deliberately *low*-toned and clownish. The Puritanical widow, we gather, looks with stern disapproval upon artists and their Bohemian ways: as representative of a creed of self-denial, she winces at their frank enjoyment of life. Stevens does not deny the sensuality of the artists; rather, he exaggerates it, calling it ‘bawdiness’ and depicting the artists as ‘well-stuffed, / Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade.’ But he defends and exalts the creative act by which the artist converts sense experience into the enduring imaginative order of art.

‘Poetry,’ he tells her, ‘is the supreme fiction,’ that is, the supreme imaginative act. Yet religion and art, though they start from opposing principles, have similarities. Both need imagination to be successful: both succeed only as they convert the abstract into the concretely imagined, into something ‘fictive.’ Religion starts with the moral law (ascetic self-denial), makes a nave of it, and from the nave builds haunted heaven. Poetry starts with the opposing law (sensual enjoyment), makes a peristyle of it, and from the peristyle projects a masque. Thus, the first converts conscience into palms, ‘like windy citherns’; the second converts bawdiness into palms, like squiggling saxophones. The destination of each is the same: some kind of imagined order or experience, of which the palms are symbols. Only as religion embodies its principles

in religious ceremony and in the imagined streets of heaven is it successful. Only as art embodies sense experiences in the imaginative order of the poem or the masque does it become enduring.

Obviously Stevens was enjoying himself when he wrote this poem. The joy of which he writes embodies itself in the joy of his performance, in the high spirits of 'muzzy bellies' and 'tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk' and 'jovial hullabaloo.' In the last two lines, with their exuberantly repeated *w*'s and short *I*'s (*this will, widows wince, fictive things wink, will, wink, widows wince*), Stevens lays aside his saxophone to perform a series of handsprings, all the time winking mischievously at the shocked widow."

Laurence Perrine
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