

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

The Emperor of Ice Cream (1923)

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

ANALYSIS

“Presenting the body of a slatternly woman at her wake attended by a man who represents pleasure and by wenches who are apparently fellow prostitutes, the refrain declares that the only ruling power is the emperor of ice cream, or physical satisfaction, but it is evident that death is the real ruler and that with it all pretense or seeming must yield to actuality.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Stevens once wrote of this poem: ‘This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet it seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry.’ The commonplace elements are the muscular cigar roller (a symbol of materialism), the wenches in their everyday dresses, the boys who bring flowers in old newspapers (stanza one), the battered dresser, the sheet, the corpse with unlovely calloused feet (stanza two). The ‘gaudiness’ is supplied, perhaps, by the sound of the lines, particularly the alliterative third line, and the stanzaic refrains with their ritualistic praise of the emperor—a figure whose rulership is of the inconsequential. By using such details in his depiction of preparations for a funeral, the poet ironically comments upon the meaninglessness of a great reality, death, in the modern world. Louise Bogan has said of Stevens: ‘His sense of form and his gifts of language were extraordinary; these, added to his dramatic power, which produced many moments of tension—“The Emperor of Ice-Cream” is an example of such a moment—lifted his work from the realm of the arabesque and the rococo.’”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 972

“‘The Emperor of Ice Cream’ is reputedly one of Stevens’ most obscure poems. The dominant theme is that of death, symbolized through a funeral which is evidently that of a poverty-stricken old lady; the obsequies are prepared by ‘the roller of big cigars,’ a personification of strong and lusty vitality, who is ordered in what is perhaps Stevens’ most famous single line, to whip ‘In kitchen cups concupiscent curds,’ i.e., apparently to prepare funeral libations which are aphrodisiac in nature. For life must struggle with

death; even as the funeral guests bring 'flowers in last month's newspapers' we are reminded that 'The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream,' i.e., that the only reality or truth, the ruling force in our lives, is necessarily the pleasure of the senses. Thus it is implied that man, believing in and serving 'the emperor of ice-cream,' gives to the enjoyment of the senses a validity, even a transcendental significance, which Christians previously gave to the idea of immortality through their faith in it."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 524

Michael Hollister (2015)