

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

The Glass of Water (1942)

That the glass would melt in heat,
That the water would freeze in cold,
Shows that this object is merely a state,
One of many, between two poles. So,
In the metaphysical, there are these poles.

Here in the centre stands the glass. Light
Is the lion that comes down to drink. There
And in that state, the glass is a pool.
Ruddy are his eyes and ruddy are his claws
When light comes down to wet his frothy jaws

And in the water winding weeds move round.
And there and in another state — the refractions,
The metaphysical, the plastic parts of poems
Crash in the mind – But, fat Jocundus, worrying
About what stands here in the centre, not the glass,

But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,
It is a state, this spring among the politicians
Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,
One would have still to discover. Among the dogs and dung,
One would continue to contend with one's ideas.

ANALYSIS

“This poem seems to move through three stages, from the physical world (the glass of water) through the world of the imagination (the metaphysical) to, finally, the world of ‘our lives’ (‘this time, this day’). The glass of water perceived as merely a state between two poles, solid and liquid, serves as the basic analogy as the poet moves into the other spheres. Whatever stands at the center (like the glass of water) is not the whole or end of reality: There are the other possible states, even in the world of imagination and the world of ‘our lives.’ ‘Fat Jocundus’ (from the Latin, meaning ‘pleasant’) symbolizes the short-sighted concern for the immediately apprehended state.”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 984