
The Life of the Party: Hedonism in Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream"

An event marked by sex and celebration, the wake in Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is inescapably bizarre. Though one might expect an air of sobriety, importance, or - at the very least - reflection to characterize a discussion of death, the poem's language and content are instead suffused with an almost nonsensical air of pomp. An unnamed speaker acts as master of ceremonies, encouraging mourners to engage in behaviors more fit for a party than a funeral, while simultaneously scorning the lifeless corpse for the same sexual revelries. Further obscuring the poem is the odd refrain, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." Though many parts of Wallace's verse seem more concerned with clouding meaning than creating it, there is sense hiding beneath every line. Using contrasting sexual imagery to create a mockery of conventional grieving practices, Stevens describes a funeral that embraces life instead of lamenting death, and subsequently exposes the hypocrisy that stems from humanity's obsession with mortality.

The first stanza of the poem describes a strangely exuberant scene of mourning that resembles a lusty celebration more than a wake. Right away, the speaker makes two demands that indicate the oddly convivial nature of the gathering; he demands that someone "Call for the roller of big cigars" and "bid him whip / in kitchen cups concupiscent curds." In the Western world, cigars are generally acknowledged as symbols of celebration - revelers light them up at the birth of a baby, or following a lucrative business agreement; they are not often associated with death and mourning. The preparation of "concupiscent curds" is also at odds with the tenor of the event. Since "concupiscent" means something that is eagerly or sexually desirous, the custards being made are imbued with lust, essentially aphrodisiacal; apparently, the pursuit of sexual pleasure will not be delayed while the dead body is prepared for burial. The lasciviousness and color of the "muscular one's" creamy dishes may also be a subtle allusion to certain intimate fluids - a sexual vision supported by the mild phallic imagery of the "big cigars." Heightening the sense of jovial merriment, the assonance of "i" sounds in "bid him whip" and the alliteration of "c" in "kitchen cups concupiscent curds" both impart a pleasing, rhythmic sweetness to the poem.

The commands to the boys and girls in the first stanza also detract from the expected sobriety of a funeral by encouraging lively, sexual interactions. The speaker says to "Let the wenches dawdle in such dress / As they are used to wear." By telling the women to retain their normal garments instead of donning the appropriately grave, black clothing usually required for such an event, the speaker slights the standard of funereal reverence. However, the odd wording of "dress / As they are used to wear" and the emphasis placed on that line by the poem's sole use of rigid iambic pentameter points to a more active lampooning of the wake. Stevens' phrasing of "are used to wear" is grammatically incorrect - this should read: "used to wearing." And his choice in diction ("are used to" over other words and phrasings such as "often", "typically", or "wont") is equally curious. ("Wont," because it upholds the current meter and syntax while creating a pleasant alliteration with "wear", would be a wonderfully apt word.) The secondary meaning of another peculiar word choice, "wenches" (meaning lewd women or prostitutes), can explain Wallace's description of the women's clothing. When considered in the context of harlots or loose women, rather than maids or servants, "dress / as they are used to wear" plays off an

admittedly derogatory conception of women. The line becomes a command that the women only wear their normal clothes - the clothes in which they are routinely "used" - but to act in their normal, "sexual" way, as well.

Stevens's wenches are not alone in being prodded towards sexual interactions; the speaker also commands complimentary behavior from the boys at the wake. The boys are called to "Bring flowers in last month's newspapers." The fact that these flowers are held in "newspapers", and "last month's" as well, rather than being bare or in more pleasantly decorative wrappings (as one typically imagines the flowers at funerals or wakes) suggests that these are an inappropriate contribution to the events. In fact, it seems that the flowers are not for the dead woman at all. The boys are actually following a different cultural convention; they are delivering ragtag street bouquets to their dates, the wenches who sit idly "dawdling" for their men. Like the "concupiscent curds" and the wenches' dresses that "they are used to wear", these flowers are symbols of and precursors to fun and courtship. Although they are out of place at this scene of death, they would fit in perfectly at a hedonistic celebration of life.

While the first stanza applies lusty diction and rhythms to create an atmosphere of pleasure and revelry, the second half of the poem uses these same themes as fodder for contempt and scorn. The use of sexual imagery is steeped in negative connotations when the speaker describes the corpse. The dead woman's feet are "horny", suggesting that she epitomizes vulgar sexuality even after her life has ended. This crude criticism is heightened by the line break after "they come" - a particularly crass allusion that implies that her feet are so sexually aroused that they approach orgasm even after death. That both of these insinuations are made using street-yard slang rather than the subtle intimations of the first stanza also speaks to the negative portrayal of sexuality in the poem. Shame is even found in death: the speaker calls for a sheet to be spread "so as to cover her face." The fact that the sheet may not be long enough to cover both the corpse's head and toes also suggests a continuation of her promiscuity; her body will not be properly covered in death, just as it was improperly exposed in life. In a final moment of indignity, the woman is reduced to a pun: "she is...dumb": without life, she is mute; while alive, she was stupid.

While the wenches and boys of the first stanza were encouraged to act sexually, the dead woman is criticized for engaging in the exact same behaviors. Although this creates a conflicting view of sexuality in the text, the ambiguity is resolved by unpacking the obscure refrain at the end of each stanza. The first half concludes with the words "Let be be finale of seem / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"; the second reads, "Let the lamp affix its beam / The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream." The two couplets possess multiple similarities that make them deserving of a joint comparison: they use the same rhyme; they have a similar syntactical structure; they conclude in exactly the same manner; the first lines are both imperatives beginning with "Let"; they are thematically linked. Interestingly, the first line of each couplet deals with the difficulty of assigning truth. "Let be be finale of seem" stresses the importance of objective, actual truth: "be", as the "finale" of reality, reigns over the subjective perceptions of "seem". Relying on an archetypal image, "Let the lamp affix its beam" is a metaphorical replication of the same idea: let truth be shown. Subsequently, both set up a verity contained in the next line, "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."

Yet, what is that truth? An "emperor" suggests a powerful sovereign considered superior even to a king. Ice-cream, however, is a dessert, not an empire or state; the emperor, then, must preside over what ice-cream represents: something sugary and delightful - a vice, a delicacy

that must be gobbled up before it melts. In the context of a poem focused on mortality, this "delicacy" must be the fading pleasures of life. The "be" and "seem" of life can then be considered as the first and second stanzas of the poem. The "be" is the truth in enjoying the moment, the lusty carousal of the wenches and boys who, through both physical copulation and hedonistic merriment, continue to cherish life. They proceed despite the "seem", which embodies the looming specter of death that will lead to their derision, just as it does for the dead body. They continue because death may seem like the end, but the pleasure in life is the true finale.

In his contrasting uses of sexual imagery, Stevens exposes the hypocrisy behind man's willingness to allow the end to change his outlook on the present - in other words, the idiocy in letting death alter one's view of life. By placing the party before the wake, readers are forced to recognize the joy in life and question why it is tarnished by death. Though this message of *carpe diem* may appear inappropriate and nonsensical to some readers, Wallace's use of Christian rhetoric indicates just how seriously he treats this subject. The four apostrophic imperatives beginning with "Let" echo God's commands at the beginning of Genesis, but even the Lord, the Christian "king" of piety and morality, is subject to the whims of the hedonistic "emperor" of ice cream. And so too is his religious dogmatism: the forceful Christian rhetoric employed by the speaker is so at odds with the poem's message that it must be considered satire. After all, if the emperor is a good host, then he would want his guests to enjoy themselves at his party.