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## **The Vital Agency of Poetic Images: A Study with Reference to Wallace Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor”**

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### **Abstract:**

Imagery in literature plays a pivotal role in metamorphosing even nauseous and obscure ideas into simple, appealing and undemanding ones, and in capturing the attention of readers by engendering a sense of interest and fervour among them. It is characterized by ‘transformative power’ and ‘vital agency,’ which are underscored by ‘thing theory,’ which insists on the role of things in literature. This research paper seeks to elucidate the signification and significance of the vital agency of poetic images. It outlines and explores the different forms of images, disclosing how poetic images display their vital agency and the thingness of things. It illustrates the prominence of the vital agency of poetic images through an analysis of Wallace Stevens’ poem, “The Motive for Metaphor.”

**Keywords:** poetic image; metaphor; symbol; thing theory; thingness; Wallace Stevens.

### **Introduction**

One cannot conceptualize any great poetry devoid of ‘imagery,’ which serves as a vital force that transforms every poem into a vigorous and delightful experience. Imagery is like oxygenated blood that flows through the arteries of every thought and aspect of ‘poetry,’ which becomes animated and afresh by the energy it receives from the poetic images. It is the vital energy of the poetic images that makes those images exercise their vital agency on readers and on the ideas conveyed in the poems, and thus, generates a transformative effect in poetry. It is indispensable, therefore, to have some basic knowledge of poetic images and their vital agency for understanding, appreciating and interpreting poetry in a better way.

### **1. Vital Agency**

One of the assertions of thing theory, which brings the centrality of things in literature to lime light, is that even material things, like human beings, possess vital agency, which plays a fabulous role in changing or affecting other beings. Thing theorists strongly believe that things have a tremendous power to form, transform and shape human beings. The foremost thing theorist Bill Brown, drawing on Leo Stein, claims that things “assert their presence and power” (4). Thing theoretically, the term, ‘vital agency,’ involves vitality or power. In order to perform

the tasks of forming, transforming and shaping other beings, a being—human being or nonhuman being—should possess energy and vitality, and it should, in this way, have the quality of agency. The attribute of agency is usually reserved for humans. But Alfred Gell, a British anthropologist, ascribes agency to even material things, which, according to him, are 'social agents,' effectuating "events to happen in their vicinity" (16). Jane Bennett, in a parallel way, admits that even nonhuman beings possess vitality (Shaviro 3), i.e., the vital agency, which has the potency to affect other beings. Images in poetry manifest themselves as what Bruno Latour calls 'actants' ("Actor-Network" 2), and as what he considers "quasi-subjects" (*We Have Never Been Modern* 51), which act as subjects "with the origin of actions" ("Technology" 103). In this sense, the poetic images mediate as effective agents that generate a transformative impact on poetic language and on readers.

## 2. Poetic Images

Poetic images are one of the fundamental constituents of great, effective and successful poetry. As remarked by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, imagery is the collective word used for a group of images. The description that is made may be of an object seen, or of a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch or other physical sensation. It may also be of the tensions or movements in one's own body. All of these are nonverbal sensations. To put them into words is to transform them (xl). M.H. Abrams defines imagery as "all objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature." Imagery designates "specific descriptions of visible objects" in a narrow sense, and "*figurative language*, especially the *vehicles* of metaphors and similes" in modern usage (121; emphasis in the original). "An image," in general, "is a representation of something" (Dennett 133). "In poetry, an image is a presentation in words of something the poet has perceived" (Ellmann and O'Clair xl). C. Day Lewis defines poetic image as "a picture made out of words" (18). He argues that an epithet, a metaphor and a simile may create an image. An image may also be presented in a phrase or passage. Every poetic image is, to some extent, metaphorical (18). He adds, "The images in a poem are like a series of mirrors set at different angles so that, as the theme moves on, it is reflected in a number of different aspects. But they are magic mirrors: they do not merely reflect the theme, they give it life and form; it is in their power to make a spirit visible" (80). Such transformative power, which is a prerequisite for manifesting vital agency, is contained in poetic images. It should be borne in mind that "a poem may itself be an image composed from a multiplicity of images" (Lewis 18). In fact, much of poetry abounds in images. This is evident in Lewis' words: "image is constant in all poetry, and every poem is itself an image" (17). Imagery as a critical term covers "those uses of language in a literary work that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or 'concrete' objects, scenes, actions, or states, as distinct from the language of abstract argument or exposition" (Baldick 106). Metaphor, C. Day Lewis argues, is the life-principle of poetry, the poet's chief test and glory (17). For Dryden, imaging is the "height and life of Poetry" (Lewis 18). Lewis feels that every image has some trace of the sensuous. The significance of image is clearly perceptible in the remark made by Ezra Pound: "It is better to present one Image

in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works” (qtd. in Lewis 25). Every successful image is the sign of a successful encounter with the real. The poet wishes to find meaning in everything (100). Commenting on Herbert Read’s view on poetry, Lewis says, “‘pure imagery’ is the essence of poetry” (130). Imagery holds a significant place in literature in general, and in poetry in particular.

### **2.1. Image: Imagination and Human Sympathy**

Poetic image has a close association with human imagination. As rightly observed by Lewis, imagination is the faculty that generates poetic images (Lewis 65). Shelley considered the imagination as a god: “Imagination is the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion” (qtd. in Lewis 65). Shelley’s idea of imagination includes the capacity to put oneself in the place of another. Such capacity gives birth to human sympathy, which inspires Shelley to regard imagination as “‘the great instrument of moral good’” (qtd. in Lewis 65). Poetic imagination relates to two important things: one is the sympathy, which is common to all humans, and the other is a perpetual reaching towards the past, the future, the absent—that is, all that lies outside the compass of present experience, without which the present experience will be incomplete (66). A poet can create an image from any given object. But, this depends on the imaginative strength of the poet’s own response to the object (90). Imagination is the instrument with which the poet explores the patterns of reality, and the images in his poetry are the highlights by which he reveals to us these patterns (104). In other words, it is by the active means of imagination that the poet explores the reality. It is through poetic image that he reduces the real world into manageable proportions and reveals the patterns of reality (117).

### **2.2. The Role of Poetic Image to Establish Kinship between Human Beings and the External Objects**

Thing theory highlights how things mediate relationships. Man is not an island. There is a close relationship between human beings and the external world. As remarked by C. Day Lewis, “the poetic image is the human mind claiming kinship with everything that lives or has lived....” (35). According to him, through metaphor, human mind establishes an affinity between external objects (35). In fact, metaphor created by human mind is an authentic evidence to show that man is influenced tremendously by the external world which plays a significant role in shaping the mindset of human beings. As obvious in Humboldt’s observation, “In considering the study of physical phenomena, we find its noblest and most important result to be a knowledge of chain of connection, by which all natural forces are linked together, and made mutually dependent upon each other: and it is the perception of these relations that exalts our views and ennobles our enjoyments” (qtd. in Lewis 36). When man observes the external world very closely, he is able to find that there is an essential relationship between him and everything in nature. Lewis affirms that the initial step in image-making is the identification of the poet with objects which appeal to his senses (67).

## 2.3. Significant Forms of Imagery

Imagery assumes different forms. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair identify four important categories in the domain of imagery. They are (i) figurative language, (ii) symbol, (iii) myth and archetype, and (iv) allusion. This categorization would be immensely useful to study them individually in detail with clarity.

### 2.3.1. Figurative Language

The poets, in order to transform a perception into words, compare their perception with something else for which they employ figurative language, which includes simile, metaphor, personification, synecdoche and metonymy. Personification refers to that figurative language in which an object is given human attributes. Synecdoche is another figure of speech in which a part of a thing or an action stands for the whole. Metonymy designates the figure of speech wherein a thing or action is replaced by one of its attributes, or by something closely associated with it (Ellmann and O'Clair xli-xlii). The figures of speech such as simile and metaphor are elaborated in the following.

#### 2.3.1.1. Simile

The simplest form of figurative comparison is simile wherein the words such as *like*, *as*, or *as if* are used in comparison (xli). Professor Young says that "comparing something unknown with something already known makes it possible to talk about the unknown" (*The Poet's Way of Knowledge* 24-25). For instance, Wallace Stevens, in his "A Postcard from the Volcano" wherein he regrets over the present generation's ignorance of the past, says, "Children picking up our bones/ Will never know these were once/ As quick as foxes on the hill" (ll. 1-3; *American Poetry* 313). There is a comparison between the 'bones' that represent the ancestors and the 'foxes on the hill.' The simile, "As quick as foxes on the hill," implies that when the ancestors were alive they were as active as the foxes on the hill. Thus, the simile expresses its vital agency to grasp the reality of the past.

#### 2.3.1.2. Metaphor

Metaphor, according to Ellmann and O'Clair, is another form of figurative language, which does not use *like* or *as* in comparison. The thing compared and the thing it is compared with are shown in an identical manner (xlii). The basic difference between simile and metaphor is "whereas metaphor identifies one thing with another, a simile involves the notion of similarity, using the words 'like' or 'as'" (Peck and Coyle 162-163). That poetic image holds immense vital agency becomes crystal clear in the fact that metaphor, which is a significant component of imagery, can be used to generate "an effect of defamiliarization"; to be more precise, metaphor could be employed "to challenge our normal way of thinking about things, reconstructing our perceptions" (Peck and Coyle 164). On the one hand, it illuminates an idea and makes it clear, and on the other hand, it "demonstrates how a writer can respond to the complexity of

experience, for metaphor is an ordering or reconciling device that enables a writer to establish connections between different areas of experience” (163-164).

### **2.3.1.2.1. The Process of Metaphor: Metaphor as the Mark of a Genius: It Simplifies Ideas**

Aristotle is regarded as the first thinker to elaborate a theory of metaphor. In his *Poetics*, he regarded metaphor as a sign of linguistic mastery, and of certain type of genius. For him, a good metaphor implies ‘an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilars’ (Punter 11-12). In the words of Aristotle, “The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius” (qtd. in Lewis 17). For David Punter, the process of metaphor refers to that process by means of which one thing is made to stand in for another thing. Furthermore, processes of metaphor are everywhere at work in language. When it is said that language is metaphorical, it signifies that language translates things, which are difficult to understand, into things which we can grasp without much difficulty. Simile is one of the frequent usages of metaphor (2-3). That is to say, when someone finds it difficult to comprehend a concept, or an idea, or an emotion that is presented in language, metaphor makes it simple and enables him or her to perceive it without any trouble (13).

### **2.3.1.2.2. Metaphors are not Universals**

Metaphors, according to David Punter, are not universals. They depend upon cultural and social perceptions (104). Therefore, there is “no single, universal, ahistorical definition of ‘metaphor’” (144). Understanding of metaphor may vary from time to time, and from culture to culture. However, metaphor is a sign, which shows that words never stand in isolation (144).

### **2.3.1.2.3. Thingness through Metaphor**

Punter, based on Van Norden’s views on metaphor, finds a distinction between Chinese and Western metaphors. According to him, in the West, metaphor was used to demonstrate a correspondence between two ontologically distinct domains. But Chinese metaphor is a way of revealing the convergence of things, the ways in which they tend towards a common objective, echoing each other according to a wider natural law. Punter formulates this idea based on Van Norden’s view that “the Chinese metaphor does not try to establish a parallelism between two domains, but rather wants to show that there is *convergence* between them: the nature of water behaves in exactly the same way as the nature of man” (qtd. in Punter 35).

Punter identifies a similarity between Hopkins’ concept of inscape and Chinese model of metaphor. For Hopkins, the use of metaphor is devoted to exposing divine intention within natural phenomena. His “Pied Beauty” reveals that the whole world, for him, is a vast series of metaphors for God’s creation. Hopkins believed that everything manifests, in one form or another, some attribute of God. This is similar to William Blake’s belief that the divine is at the heart of everything. We can grasp the thingness of thing by seizing upon its (thing’s) divine representation. For Hopkins, the divine attributes are present in the phenomena of the world. It is

the duty of the poet to find new ways to manifest in linguistic and literary form the relevance of these metaphors (Punter 35-36). From thing theoretical point of view, all people see the world but most often fail to look into it. Only great thinkers, artists and writers are gifted to delve deep into things of the world, recognize the divine attributes present in them and thus grasp the thingness of things. In literature, the creative writers, particularly the poets, who have deep insight into things, exhibit the thingness of things through metaphors, images and symbols.

### 2.3.2. Symbol

Symbol finds a distinguishing place in literature. It refers to "an object or an action which both represents itself and at the same time has a larger meaning than it ordinarily has—a meaning which can often be multiple or ambiguous" (Ellmann and O'Clair xliii). Symbols are more suggestive than figures of speech (xliii). W.B. Yeats believes, "A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame" (qtd. in Ellmann and O'Clair xlv). Comte Goblet d'Alviella, in his book on *The Migration of Symbols*, defines symbol as "a representation which does not aim at being reproduction" (qtd. in Symons 1). For Thomas Carlyle, a symbol consists of concealment and revelation. He adds that "In the Symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is...some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there" (qtd. in Symons 2). Carlyle's view echoes in Gerard Manly Hopkins' belief that everything manifests some attributes of God. The natural things in the universe herald the splendor of the Infinite. Such splendor and the divine attributes of God are brought to light through symbol. We should remember that symbol is that by which "the soul of things can be made visible" (5). From thing theoretical point of view, the soul of things could designate their thingness.

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, who, like Heidegger, is highly critical of technology, attacks science and progress as materialising forces of the world. To him the ideal is the real, and spiritual beauty is the essential beauty which is reflected in the material beauty (Symons 27). It is the right time for us to realize that the spiritual beauty is embedded into God-created things. Unfortunately, the modern humans, with all scientific and technological advancements, have reduced the things to mere objects of use. This is the reason why they are unable to perceive the spiritual beauty (another aspect of thingness) which presences itself in things. In order to identify the spiritual beauty of things, we should, first of all, approach the things as they really are. We should stop our attitude of treating them as mere objects.

#### 2.3.2.1. Beginning of Symbolism and its Significance in Literature

Symbolism is a significant component of great literature. As pointed out by Richard Ellmann, in his introduction to Arthur Symons' book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, "symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them, in heaven, when God named the world into being" (1). It is in these beginnings, we find



what symbolism in literature is. Symbolism in literature is a form of expression for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. This form of expression is approximate and arbitrary until it has obtained the force of a convention (1).

### **2.3.2.2. No Literature without Symbolism**

Symbolism is part and parcel of human life. Therefore, as affirmed by Richard Ellmann, there can be neither literature nor language without symbolism. The words themselves are symbols and it is the letters which compose them. To mere sounds of the voice (i.e. the oral utterance of words), we have agreed to give certain significations or meanings. Similarly, agreed to translate these sounds by the combination of the letters in the form of words. The significance of symbolism in the daily life of human beings is quite perceptible in the words of Carlyle: “It is in and through Symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being; those ages, moreover, are accounted the noblest which can the best recognize symbolical worth, and prize it highest” (qtd. in Symons 1). Huysmans believed that “truth can be reached and revealed only by symbol” (Symons 80).

### **2.3.3. Myth and Archetype**

Mythology is a collection of myths. Like a symbol, a myth involves an extended plot. It is story which symbolizes something else. Through the lives and actions of immortal beings, myths explain not only the origins and qualities of natural forces but also the characteristic situations of human life and history, and social customs and observances. Such beings are usually imagined in human form, with human passions and ambitions. Some of these immortals personify natural forces like fertility and the sea. Some others personify abstract human qualities like love and wisdom. An archetype refers to “a symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals so frequently or prominently as to suggest...that it embodies some essential element of ‘universal’ human experience” (Baldick 16). It is “a basic model from which copies are made” (Peck and Coyle 145). As noted by Bijay Kumar Das, archetypal criticism has its basis in James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, and in Jungian psychology, wherein the word, archetype, is applied to what C.G. Jung “called ‘primordial urges,’ the ‘psychic residue’” (310). Northrop Frye is a distinguished Canadian literary critic, who is acclaimed for his archetypal criticism, which is evident in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

### **2.3.4. Allusion**

Allusion is a significant literary device, which is employed to embellish a literary work, and which often leads the reader’s mind to complications. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for example, is a marvelous work, which abounds in allusions. Allusion designates “an indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader’s familiarity with what is thus mentioned”



(Baldick 6). In this regard, "When the writer looks out to life, history or literature, our sense of the immediate events being described is modified by this reference" (Peck and Coyle 143).

### 3. Vital Agency of Poetic Images in Wallace Steven's "Motive for Metaphor"

Wallace Stevens is one of the major American poets. Though he was a trained lawyer, he "never used overtly legal themes and settings in his poems, as Kafka, for example, did in his stories" (Grey 233). His poetry abounds in images. His poem, "The Motive for Metaphor," is an apposite example to illustrate the vital agency of poetic images. The poem opens with the portrayal of the autumn and its signification through various images. The word, 'autumn' itself is an image, which exercises its vital agency, by manifesting itself as a symbol of decay and death, and thus, creating a sense of pessimistic sentiments among humans, as everything in autumn is "half-dead." One of the most perceptible examples to exhibit a sense of decay is the condition of "the trees in autumn." Autumn and things therein (e.g. trees, leaves and wind) operate as effective agents that could trigger the feelings and emotions of the readers by linking their mind to the external reality. The images of 'wind' and 'words,' with a poignant description, contribute to the exacerbation of a sense of hopelessness brought by autumn: "The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves/ And repeats words without meaning" (ll. 3-4). In these lines, one finds simile as well as personification. During the autumn, trees begin to shed their leaves. The fall of leaves from the trees is described as a stumbling block for the free movement of the wind. In this sense, the movement of the wind is compared with "a cripple among leaves." It is a direct comparison, made with the help of the word, 'like,' which indicates that the comparison is a simile. Analogously, speech is regarded as a significant feature of humans. But here, the moving wind is said to utter "words without meaning." It is personified as a human being, who speaks words. Thus, the images in the form of simile and personification, exhibit their vital agency, by making the setting of the autumn more vigorous.

The image of spring engenders in the readers the thought of active and energetic life in nature, and thereby, it has the vital agency to promote optimistic feelings and thoughts in the readers:

In the same way, you were happy in spring,  
With the half colors of quarter-things,  
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,  
The single bird, the obscure moon. (Stevens, "Motive" 345)

The sense of happiness during the spring is triggered by the poetic images like sky, clouds, bird and moon. At the same time, "the half colors of quarter-things" symbolize the idea that there is no complete exodus from the autumn to the spring. Therefore, even the spring has not become completely a joyful occasion. However, the central reason why the poet is not quite jubilant even after the advent of the spring is disclosed in the metaphor of "the half colors of quarter-things" that serves as an active agent to exhibit the intricacies of reality experienced by the poet. In other words, the poet encounters a sense of obscurity in reality:

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world  
 Of things that would never be quite expressed,  
 Where you yourself were never quite yourself  
 And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:  
 The motive for metaphor, shrinking from  
 The weight of primary noon,  
 The A B C of being. (345)

The poet experiences the external world as “an obscure world/ Of things that would never be quite expressed.” The metaphor of “obscure moon” manifests its power and vital agency by disclosing the limitation of human mind to perceive the “obscure world” and the things therein. Pietrzak, drawing on Heidegger, argues, “There is no chance for the moon to tear the world from the darkness of concealment of Being” (211). In this way, the image of moon, unveils its vitality and power, by becoming what Heidegger calls ‘broken tool’ or ‘present-at-hand thing.’ Heidegger interprets things under the realm of equipment. Accordingly, he identifies two kinds of equipment—ready-to-hand things and present-at-hand things. As remarked by Graham Harman, ready-to-hand things, in Heidegger’s view, are those things, which are withdrawn from human sight (37). Present-at-hand things, for Heidegger, are those things, which become visible or which draw the human attention by their “possible breaks” (*Being and Time* 107), or by their failure to function in a proper way. The metaphor of “obscure moon” in Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor” is a broken tool, in Heideggerian terms, because it fails to illuminate the “obscure world,” and therefore, the Being of the world, in Heideggerian sense, remains ‘concealed.’ Thus, image of the moon exerts its vital agency with its malfunctioning, because of which the humans become unable to comprehend the reality. Furthermore, in such faint moonlight, persons are not quite themselves, and “did not want nor have to be.” They do not desire for changes. In this context, Wit Pietrzak argues that Stevens’ “The Motive for Metaphor” explores “the impossibility of reaching the permanence of elucidation” (211). In one way, the poet admits the human limitation to apprehend the truth in nature. As remarked by Pietrzak, “the motive for metaphor,” in Stevens’ poem, “becomes tantamount to the change itself” (212).

Commenting on the significance of the colon at the end of the phrase “Desiring the exhilarations of changes:” Pietrzak states that it “indicates that the desire for changes manifests itself in the motive for metaphor” (212). For Stevens, the fundamental “motive for metaphor” is “shrinking from/ The weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being.” Phillip Stambovsky, in this context, says, “The desire for ‘the exhilarations of changes,’ in the self as well as in nature, is in a positive sense the motive for metaphor” (49). Northrop Frye, in a parallel way, remarks, “Outside literature, the main objective for writing is to describe this world” (31). In literature, an “associative language” in the form of “figures of speech” is used to describe the world (31-32). Stevens is ambivalent concerning apprehension of reality. In the poem, “The Motive for

Metaphor," he is highly sceptical of apprehension of reality which he discloses through his sense of obscurity in the world. His scepticism is intensified in the last stanza:

The ruddy temper, the hammer  
Of red and blue, the hard sound—  
Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,  
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (Stevens, "Motive" 345)

According to Northrop Frye, "What Stevens calls the weight of primary noon, the ABC of being, and the dominant X is the objective world, the world set over against us" (31). The symbol, X, is "used to represent a number, or the name of person or thing that is not known or stated" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). In this sense, 'X,' which represents reality in the poem, and which is said to be "vital, arrogant, fatal dominant," symbolizes not only the speaker's indefinite and obscure idea of reality, but also his submissive attitude before reality. Thus, the metaphor of X enforces its vital agency over humans. It should be borne in mind that Stevens' oscillation between human mind (imagination) and reality, and his obscurity and scepticism concerning reality change in the course of time. In his essay, "Three Academic Pieces," he admits poetry as "a part of structure of reality" (*Necessary Angel* 81), insisting that "metaphor has its own aspect of the ideal" (81-82). It implies that metaphor has the power to disclose the aspects of reality. In an analogous way, in his essay, "About of Marianne Moore's Poems," he regards reality as "the aspect of the thing" (*Necessary Angel* 95). It signifies the idea that one can have a glimpse at the internal reality through the perceivable external reality of things.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the poetic images, their kinds, their significance and significations that has been rendered in this research enterprise authenticates the argument that poetic images possess dynamic power and vital agency, which are a prerequisite for good and transformative poetry. The analysis of Wallace Stevens' poem evidences the argument, and endorses the prominence of poetic images.

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