

Wallace Stevens
"The Comedian as the Letter C"
A Mind Above a Continent

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is the most dramatic if not the most ambitious work in the whole of the poetry of Wallace Stevens. The majority of the critical exegeses of Stevens' pivotal work concern themselves with analysis of the work as a framework in which the poet has worked up an incomprehensible extended metaphor of the imagination and reality. Some have re-extended, from textual evidence, this permeating analysis or interpretation, to include Stevens and his poetic capabilities. Only a few have considered the possibility that Stevens may have been risking the didactic in willfully constructing an allegory. The majority undoubtedly correct considering the pervasive dawn of the stream of consciousness school of poetry Stevens was familiar with, and the French school of "pure" poetry which was highly touted at the time. The evidence of any such rationale for "The Comedian as the Letter C" provided by the author himself are scarce and ambiguous prior to the poem's conception, so the concept that "The Comedian as the Letter C" is a summing up of Harmonium is a highly logical and natural assumption, and one that an overwhelming number of critics have lionized. In considering Stevens as an individual described by his biographical information and through his letters, and described by his early poetry and literary studies, and considering that the poem was written by a man whose life was stable and comfortable, a life which could forego exhibiting himself on a metaphorical level in the public's eye, I find myself in the minority that would favor an allegorical interpretation of "The Comedian as the Letter C". This may be especially true since Stevens arrogantly might cast himself as the of the literary priest, or professor, delivering an "Academic Discourse at Havana" to the literary scene of his time.

In The Necessary Angel Stevens explains how he sees the imagination at work.

What happens is that it (the imagination) is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it.

It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality. 1

Imagination is a power in most of Stevens essays that illuminates reality and can be seen as a possibly overwhelming force if unconstrained, but a power that he knows the uses of and can be shaped to a poet's ends.

He must be able to abstract himself, and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination.

He knows perfectly that he cannot be too noble a rider, that he cannot rise up loftily in helmet and armor on a horse. 2

In the light of these definitions of Stevens on the relationship of the imagination to reality it seems difficult to re-echo the theme of so many critics who see Stevens ululating on the literary stage at the loss of his creativity. Stevens imagination is a conduited force, in this instance poured into the character Crispin, who is made much larger than a persona of Stevens floundering in life. Stevens gives evidence that Crispin is a giant in the "moonlight",