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21L.004 Reading Poetry

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The House Was Quiet And The World Was Calm

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.
-Wallace Stevens

In his poem “The House was Quiet and the World was Calm,” Wallace Stevens uses a combination of literal and abstract images to define truth. This approach may seem to be cumbersome, but Stevens expertly navigates it through the use of poetic devices and structure. As the poem is read, a description of a “reader” on a “quiet” “night” unfolds into a concrete definition of “truth.” The description is driven through the use of repetition of concrete ideas. The definition sharply contrasts the concreteness of the description and the turning point between them adds emphasis to Stevens' definition. Through the use of this turning point and concrete repetition, Stevens produces a poem which

defines truth in a believable and trustworthy manner.

The first twelve lines of “The House was Quiet and the World was Calm” read smoothly, although some of the metaphors introduced in them are quite complex. There are no clear changes in verb tense, and the series of images are quite literal. Stevens begins with, “The house was quiet and the world was calm.” Both images from this line are concrete and common. One could easily imagine a quiet house and a calm world, or at least a calm area surrounding the house. The thirteenth line, which is: “And the world was calm . The truth in a calm world,” contrasts sharply with the previous twelve. It is the first and only time in the poem in which a sentence begins in the middle of a line. Also it is the first time in which the subject of the sentence is not entirely tangible. The contrast becomes even clearer when the thirteenth line is read with the last three lines: “The truth in a calm world, / In which there is no other meaning, itself/ Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself/ Is the reader leaning late and reading there.” When compared to the first line, one can see a clear change in verbiage as Stevens transitions from the use of “was” to “is.” Also these lines repeat “itself,” which one could infer refers to truth and through this repetition, Stevens engenders a clear and tangible definition for truth. In essence, Stevens uses the last four lines of the poem to state, “the truth...is calm...summer and night...[and,] the reader leaning late and reading [in the house].” Although the two parts of Stevens' poem can be easily separated and defined, their purpose is not self explanatory.

On a first read, Stevens' thirteen line description of a reader in a quiet house is quite convoluted. The first six stanzas seem to make up a description, but their individual phrases are difficult to interpret. For example in lines two and three Stevens writes, “summer night/ was like the conscious being of the book.” The idea that a summer night and a book are conscious beings is difficult to digest, and thus it forces the reader to connect to the concrete images of the phrase,

or “summer night” and “the book.” In fact, all of the phrases in the first six stanzas (thirteen lines) contain series of concrete images that resonate with the reader. In the first thirteen lines, the words “Summer,” “night,” “house,” “quiet,” “world,” “calm,” “reader,” and “book” are all repeated. This repetition causes these words to resound with the reader. Together they form an image of a summer night in a calm world, where someone is reading a book in a quiet house. This image is general and it allows almost every reader of this poem to connect to a time in their life in which they read a book in a quiet warm house. This connection is incredibly important to the poem because it opens the reader to accept Stevens' definition of truth.

Stevens ends with “The truth in a calm world, / In which there is no other meaning, itself/ Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself/ Is the reader leaning late and reading there.” If taken out of context, the reader could question many aspects of the definition, for example where is this calm world? Or where is this reader leaning late and reading? Yet in context the reader returns to the images created by the first six stanzas to answer these questions. “The truth in a calm world” becomes the truth in the scene in the reader's mind. This personal connection strengthens Stevens' definition because it allows the reader to possess the “truth.” Without this connection, the truth is Stevens' idea and the question centers on whether or not the reader accepts his definition. With it the reader must question themselves or leave the definition unquestioned.

Another facet of Stevens' definition is the aforementioned repetition of the word, “itself.” The new sentence in the middle of line thirteen draws the reader's attention to its subject, “truth.” Thus when the pronoun “itself” appears and is repeated, the reader immediately associates it with “truth.” The last three lines then become a series of direct linkages: “the truth...is calm,” “the truth...is summer and night.” This allows the reader to easily connect the concrete images from

earlier in the poem with the previously abstract notion of truth. As the definition finishes, the truth itself becomes concrete.

Wallace Stevens' poem "The House was Quiet and the World was Calm," begins with a description which contains a repeated series of concrete images. As the lines unfold, their repetition produces a clear image of a reader leaning over a book in a quiet house, surrounded by a calm world. This image is broken temporarily in the thirteenth line, when Stevens begins a new sentence with the abstract notion of truth. This break represents a turning point that draws attention to the truth and allows Stevens to begin to define it. In the last three lines of the poem, Stevens reunites the concrete images from his description into a concrete definition for truth. This method leaves the reader with a clear and personal definition of truth.