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The Allure of Metaphor: From Stevens’ “Motive For Metaphor” to Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”

The act of literary composition is indeed a physical, strenuous activity. Assembling words into strings of sentences, sentences into carefully delineated paragraphs or stanzas, and so on, is a more difficult, arduous process than most non-writers realize. However, another aspect of this physicality occurs within readers as well. In the same way a writer activates strenuous effort to facilitate composition, a reader ignites a similar physicality during the process of literary digestion. In addition, readers employ multiple theoretical lenses while absorbing textual information, most of time without conscious knowledge of it, because accumulating information, regardless of the “textual type”, initiates and plays upon our personal feelings, memories, and experiences. Reader-response, a theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt, most accurately examines this process. This theory can also be used to focus on the physicality of English Studies in relation to how a reader individually experiences a literary work. Author and professor Rob Pope attests to this multi-faceted notion of a more physical approach to interpretation, something he refers to as “doing English” in the dedication of his book, *Studying English Literature and Language: An Introduction and Companion*. To investigate this physicality in relation to reader-response theory, we can look at two diverse literary texts for inspiration; the first, “Motive for Metaphor” by U.S. modernist poet Wallace Stevens, and second, “Young Goodman Brown” by U.S. novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. Both of these authors employ the seductive power of metaphor to inspire a physical response from the reader, thus promoting a deeper interaction with an understanding of the text.

First, before we crack open the egg of analysis, it is important to identify the tenets of reader-response theory. This theory focuses on the reader and their experience, as opposed to many other theories that position themselves with a focus on the author, content, and the context, or the form of a specific work. This theory aims to unearth the specific function of audience, and “According to Rosenblatt, the role of the reader had been overlooked in previous theoretical discussions on reading” (Davis 72). Secondly, this theory envisions the act of reading as an act of interpretation. Reader-response suggests textual digestion as a performance where both the reader and the text join together to produce meaning based upon the reader’s past experiences and current personality. To bolster the validity of this suggestion, take for example, two friends (assuming similar in culture, age, geographical location, and moral values) who watch a movie together. Although these individuals are similar, their interpretations of the same film will differ because they will each relate the film to their own personal experiences. This differentiation clearly testifies to the power of reader-response and the different ways readers bridge the gaps between literature and life. In the same way, we can apply this to “Motive for Metaphor” and “Young Goodman Brown” because metaphors work in the same way reader-response does, by triggering reactions, both hopeful and physical, unique to each reader’s interpretational performance. For most readers, the initial confrontation with metaphorical messages began when they were very young. Over the years, readers learn, “Metaphors [are] special kinds of ‘things,’ different from real words but hiding among them…what we really learned, or had known all along, was how to "metaphor," how to perform an operation in which we moved from a duplicitous text to a ‘real’ meaning somewhere else” (Owen and Reed 287). Notice the word “perform”, which identifies clear connections to physical interpretation, and this interpretation of course, lights a candle for reader-response theory.

Now, keeping Owen’s statement in mind, I will assert my textual analyses in relationship to my claims for reader-response and physicality in “Motive for Metaphor” by Stevens. In the first stanza the speaker declares, “You like it under the trees in autumn, / Because everything is half dead” (ll. 1-2). Notice the speaker utilizes the pronoun “you”. It is uncertain whether this unidentified narrator is actually speaking to the reader, or if he or she is reacting to a metaphor in his or her life. I think the beauty of reader-response resides mainly in the interpretive sphere. If I believe the narrator is speaking to me because this poetic encounter with autumn moves me and is applicable to my life, then that is exactly what it means. However, if another reader imagines this metaphor as a confrontational situation between the narrator and his or her own reactions to meeting metaphor in real life, then that is fine too. Also, examining further word choice, we see that Stevens employs the word “is”, the present-tense third-person form of the verb “to be”. The reader can easily infer that autumn is occurring now, and the use of “half-dead” implies aging, or dying. Stevens could have used “half-alive” in this stanza; however, since autumn transitions into winter, we know everything in nature is about to undergo a change. This change, of course, is from life to death. Stanza one also describes the wind as “a cripple among the leaves / [that] repeats words without meaning” (ll. 3-4). When we imagine fall, particularly late fall, it is usually as an undesirable, inevitable journey into winter, and yet, there seems to be no progression here. Even the wind is slowing down; i.e. “crippled”. So, while many may initially appreciate winter because of the change it creates, the long, cold bitterness of reality soon sets in. When the reader looks at the second part of this line, he or she is presented with “words without meaning” (l. 4). Here, the audience gets a small peek into Stevens’ implied comparison between life and the seasons. Just as the seasons change, without anyone raising an eyebrow, without any real meaningful commentary, so do our lives. Sometimes, even people meander through life the same way nature meanders through her seasons. The specific word choice in this stanza points readers in a certain direction; however, the navigation of further interpretation is up to the audience.

With this detailed metaphorical introduction, the reader is afforded the opportunity to get his or her feet wet with meaning. The portrayal of the looming winter and “crippled” movement of nature is, unless you are from Florida, a commonly relatable sensation. This imagistic conjuring could inspire numerous avenues of memory recollection such as agreement from a person hailing from North Dakota, or a disagreement and curiosity from someone living in the south. As we can see, metaphor facilitates emotion via the powerful performance we experience when interpreting metaphors, and because Stevens relates his message so proficiently, readers are able to imagine winter through his eyes. According to Karin de Weille, author of “How We are Changed by the Rhythms of Poetry”, “The most powerful poems take hold of us physically. They cause us to embody the emotion, the way an actor does, not just observe it or think it” (1). So, the process of metaphorical interpretation is imposed on us, not from an authoritarian command from the author, but from our own inability to resist making connections between literature, notably texts that employ metaphor, and our minds. In this sense, Stevens’ words provoke a kind of dramaturgical action, and that action inspires readers to get physical as well.

In contrast to the first stanza’s setting, the second stanza goes back in time and speaks about the spring. Stevens’ speaker again asserts to an unnamed interlocutor, perhaps us, his readers, “In the same way, you were happy in the spring” (l. 5), which are common associations with springtime, another time when nature is in transition (from spring to summer). By utilizing “you” again, Stevens facilitates a more direct connection with his readers because an appreciation for spring is considerably more unanimous. Although this reference asserts a more universal agreement, it still inspires emotions and interpretations that will exert specificity to each reader. You and I might both love spring, but while you might love it for the flowers, I love it for the rain. Now, because the springtime usually suggests a rebirth, or a new birth, many readers might take this reference and liken it to youth. This creates two different interpretations for spring and winter. Even though both winter and spring produce change, something humans both desire and fear, the results of these changes are very different. These changes are illuminated in lines 11 and 12, where Stevens proclaims that spring is also, “Where you yourself were not quite yourself, / And did not want to be”; this suggests growth and the possibility for change (as opposed to winter that facilitates death), but also that when something is not wholly definable—that is not concrete—it is easily changed. Here, we can see a “motive for metaphor” and define it on our own. As in poetry, people use metaphors to not wholly define things, but to allude to or suggest specific ideas without stating them directly; however, metaphors often have ambiguous or multiple meanings, and their significance is often dependent on the reader. In this sense, we often search for meanings in every nook and cranny of life, attempting to bend and mold our experiences to match our desired finish lines, even when some situations have no meaning at all.

The final stanza in this poem floods the reader with even more metaphorical messages. Here, the reader is bombarded with the poem’s most sensory imagery, which demonstrates Stevens’ talent for making the unknown identifiable through indirect ways, i.e. “intimation”. His last stanza goes as follows:

The ruddy temper, the hammer

Of red and blue, the hard sound—

Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,

The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (ll. 17-20)

In this section, images of “hammers” and “steel” work to produce a “hard sound” and a “sharp flash”. For me, this entire last stanza seems to detail the actions of a worker, such as a carpenter, mechanic, or a metalworker—all professions that require hard labor, which correlates with how the above professions produce creations, Stevens creates his poem, and the readers create their meanings.

Stevens also uses dashes in this stanza, a technique not employed anywhere else in this poem. Since this is the first time Stevens utilizes dashes in his poem, the reader is immediately prompted to ask why. The punctuated emphasis on this specific stanza also forces the reader to follow a slower rhythm, i.e. as we face “the hard sound—/ Steel against intimation—” (ll.18-19). These dashes both connect and separate lines 18 and 19. This slower rhythm encourages the reader to pay attention, and really analyze the words (i.e. “intimation”) immediately around and within the dashes. Ironically, Stevens’ narrator describes physical action at the same time the reader is engaging in the physical action of analysis.

Interestingly, the next line contains the word “intimation”, a key element of the poem. Interestingly this clue is saved until the very end of the poem. “Intimation”, meaning to make known in an indirect way, is the literal purpose of a metaphor. Throughout the poem, the reader has been digging their elbows in the sand, searching for meaning, guidance, and purpose through the “metaphors” in the poem, when the most helpful hint has been sitting at the bottom all along. “Steel against intimation” could suggest the conflict between desire for meaning and purpose and our rudimentary everyday lives. Many people desire change and search for meaning and a sense of gratification in life, but will those inquirers ever find it? Although the desire for change may not be valid across the board, the yearning for meaning is. For years people have wondered about the meaning and purpose of life, and while each one of us will interpret this differently, it powerfully delivers an endless list of questions to readers. Are we even looking in the right place, and can intimation and imagination stand up against the “steel” of our daily demands?

In the closing line Stevens really packs a punch. This poem closes with seeming confusion as it presents what “you” (we) are mostly shrinking from: “The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X” (l. 20). The meaning of “X” is left unidentified, and Stevens exploits a very strange arrangement of words to extend or deepen the ambiguity here. He uses “vital” in the same line as “fatal”, two total opposites of one another. It is possible he is implying that everything comes to an end, that the ends in life are necessary. The desire and fear of change acknowledged above could be a testament to the recognition of the inevitability of death. The “fatal” is then, unavoidable and inevitable; the final change or “exhilaration” is death. Taking a closer look at the other two words in this last line—“arrogant” and “dominant X”—could throw the reader even more off track. If “vital” and “fatal” are removed, and “arrogant” and “dominant X” are combined, the reader or listener (the “you”) is taunted with clarity in a very unclear analogy. We can spend our whole lives desiring change and searching for meaning, and whether we spend the time searching or not, time will pass. Time, inevitably death, is boastful and pompous, and if we grow stagnant and complacent time will not idle with us. This specific strategy employed by Stevens does more than perplex. This additional example of effective choice creates ample opportunity for readers to conduct a personal analysis and also encourages a deeper level of interpretation.

The recognition of finality listed above effectively combines all of Stevens’ previous ideas. This reference could lead to many conclusions. Whether this is a reference towards the end of Stevens’ career (as a poet or a lawyer), of this specific poem, or of life in general, is not really a big concern. The important distinction to recognize is often times humans search for gratification and meaning through metaphor, and may waste their lives searching in fruitless places. Time waits for no [wo]man. However, with respect to reader-response theory, we must also consider an opposite assumption. With such a short time to accomplish all of our dreams, perhaps that is what solidifies and elevates our actions. Instead of time working against us, proving our investigations fruitless, maybe it complements us. What we choose to do (and alternately, what we choose not to do) may inscribe a very specific meaning to our individual lives.

Because not everyone approaches a text in the same way, the complexities of this stanza clearly identify the validity in reader-response theory. I molded this poem into my own meaning, while also trying to consider alterations, based on my life experiences. However, it is important to note that even both sides of my assumptions are not blanket statements for the masses. While this poem inspired intensely physical analysis on my part that lead me to certain conclusions, it will not lead every reader down the same road. No interpretation nullifies a previous or subsequent interpretation. Each conclusion, in fact, elevates the previous, and compliments Stevens’ work.

Now, in order to compare the second, “Young Goodman Brown”, we will venture down another literary road of metaphorical emphasis and physicality. In this narrative, Nathaniel Hawthorne also utilizes heavy metaphorical language to tell his story. He uses symbols, the names of characters, and specific events to represent a specific time in U.S. history and to tell a deeper story below the literal tale. As with Wallace Stevens, Hawthorne’s utilization of metaphor in this story conveys powerful messages that inspire a deeper level of interpretation. This in-depth interpretation forces the reader to enter a more physically demanding state of analysis. For the physical power of metaphor, Hawthorne does more than his fair share of bolstering my claims.

Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” takes place in 1690 in Salem, Massachusetts during a period of considerable religious turbulence, which immediately helps the reader to settle in his or her seat in terms of time frame. The title of this piece, also the name of the main character, encourages an emphasis on “goodness”, and blatantly hints at a “Good-man”. This initial portrayal sets up certain anticipations, “The story begins as a conventional allegory, creating the expectation that the characters will consistently exhibit the abstractions they symbolize” (Levy 376). For example, as we progress, this piece includes metaphorical reference to Brown’s wife, who is symbolically, or more allegorically, named Faith; the intentional use of representational colors; Satanic figures and the temptations of evil. However, our initial expectations experience conflict as we read a text riddled with metaphors, and the significance of those metaphors is that they inspire the reader to probe beyond the text’s surface and get physically involved in the intense psychological unfolding of the story.

Barely three small paragraphs in, Hawthorne employs metaphor almost immediately, first with Brown’s wife, and then with a reference to a pink ribbon in her hair. By choosing the name “Faith” for a wife, and relating it to the color pink, the reader immediately assumes that faith is a cherished element in Brown’s world and is something that also represents innocence, compassion, and hope. When Brown leaves for his walk into the woods at night, Faith looks at him with a pensive sadness, “Faith still peeping after him, with melancholy air, in spite of her pink ribbons” (Hawthorne 63). So, not only is Brown leaving his wife, named Faith, but he is also marching into a world where faith, in both senses, does not accompany him.

The trip itself is vague and uncertain, as Hawthorne negates to explain Brown’s purpose in any way. We do not know why Brown is leaving, who invited him on this journey, or why. Hawthorne, however, does provide the reader with one powerful sentence, “Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose” (65). Here, the reader can validate the hypothesis about an absence of faith, and this sentence, while it does provide some clarity, also proposes a little more confusion to the reader. Why would a man that cherishes faith so dearly, be in “haste” to participate in what we can interpret as an exploration of evil?

Brown begins to explore the forest, and he quickly encounters a man that is similar in age and appearance to him. Hawthorne then illustrates the stranger’s staff, “which bore a likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent” (65). Second only to the setting of the woods, this metaphor is extremely powerful. The serpent, in relation to evil, is something a vast majority of readers can effortlessly categorize. Whether it is because a reader is familiar with the Hebrew Bible, has watched movies like *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese, or has read other texts like “Paradise Lost” by John Milton, the association between a snake and some kind of evil is almost automatic. These links to previous texts help readers prepare themselves while also encouraging a new analysis. While some may assert the serpent reference is a little cliché, I think it is everything but cliché. Here, Hawthorne employs a metaphor that quickly resonates across a breadth of diverse readers. Since reader-response is so versatile, Hawthorne makes deliberate choices to ensure that we arrive at a specific conclusion, and this would have been all the more likely in 1835 when he wrote it for a fairly homogenous U.S. readership.

On Brown’s journey, he begins to recognize that other people are headed in the same direction as he is. While Brown seems to be perpetually in conflict with the temptation of evil, others seem to him fully dedicated to partaking in the events that await them. These people are individuals that Brown has looked up to throughout his life, and it is very challenging for him to understand why they are so willing to engage in what seems to be a demonic event. These characters include Brown’s own family, his minister, his teacher, and most of the high-flying people from the town. After identifying the familiar face of Goody Cloyse, the woman that taught him his catechism, Brown asserts, “Not another step will I budge on this errand. What if a wretched old woman do choose to go to the devil, when I thought she was going to heaven” (66). Although these people are specific to Brown’s life, the representation of these individuals bleeds off of the pages and into our own consciousness. In other words, we relate them to people we know. In the same way Brown is antagonized with confusion, the reader also experiences mental skirmish. As people mature, they often realize the mentors they once looked up to and pictured as “perfect” seem to gradually lose the divine status they once held in our psyches. Hawthorne’s characters therefore serve as metaphors for our own “heroes”, and each experience will be unique.

Once Brown is deep within the wilderness, he makes an attempt to look up to the sky and pray. However, a “black mass of cloud” (67) sweeps across the sky, blocking his view of the heavens. Notice the reference to “black” here in contrast to Faith’s pink ribbon. While Hawthorne uses the pink ribbon to symbolize innocence, he uses the color black to represent evil in the woods. Once the clouds dissipate, the pink ribbon flutters down from the sky and is caught by Brown. Once acquired, Brown yells, “My Faith is gone… there is no good on earth” (67). Again, “Faith” is used metaphorically as a double-sided tool. Not only does Brown assume his wife is “gone”, i.e. succumbed to the temptations of evil, but we as readers understand that his spirit is lost as well.

Later in the story, while Brown watches some sort of demonic worship service, the reader learns about “one stain of guilt, a mighty blood-spot” (68), which presents another instance where Hawthorne draws on the use of color to relay a message. In each instance, evil is associated with black or red, innocence with pink. Once again, these imagistic presentations function as metaphorical statements that are very important because they allow the reader to make visual connections to their lives. These visual representations procure significant connection between a reader and a text, and “It has been suggested that if a picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps we can regard a metaphor as being worth 1000 pictures” (Berman and Brown 4). The number “1000” is not literal, but is a suggestion of flexibility. For example, the reference to a blood spot above contains only eight words; however, those eight words will blossom into many assumptions across a breadth of many readers. Metaphors bend and mold to our own situations and memories in our minds, and those correlations serve as the links between readers and texts.

Later, a “dark figure” states, “Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness” (68). Now, the reader has more concretely identified the theme of this story, and is able to compile each metaphor and reference into a more solidified idea. However, this comfort in the concrete does not last for long. As the text draws to an end, neither Brown nor the readers know if this entire evolution of events even happened: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” (69). Ironically, both the reader and Brown are experiencing a physical response to a “reading”. Here, Brown and the reader join together by interpreting the same situation. Whether a dream or reality, the effects on Brown’s perceptions take over his mind. He is transformed into “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man” (69). Again, Hawthorne uses color—“a darkly meditative man”—to describe his subject and relay distinct messages to his readers. Now, at the conclusion of this text, the reader is left with ample opportunity to draw his or her own conclusions about the text with the help of the author’s alluring metaphorical language.

Although these texts are remarkably different in era and genre, they compliment each other when used to examine the power of metaphor and the vast array of interpretative reactions that are possible. The unlimited potential that stems from these texts is an example of the way the text and reader work together on a physical as well as an intellectual level. In different ways, with different subjects, two authors are able to powerfully relay their messages and move us emotionally by utilizing the same seductive technique of metaphor. This seductive power was highly evident when I first read “Motive for Metaphor” and “Young Goodman Brown”. I felt like my head was spinning and that I might get sick from all the possible interpretive roads I could explore. I made correlations between my life and each text based on the mental baggage I carry. Every reader brings their own index of memories and perceptions, and those elements help us all to get physical with literature. While I might have felt sick initially, I also felt a lot of comfort and connection to the authors and the tales told in each. The metaphors in each text meant something specifically to me, and in the words of Sylvia Plath, “I wanted to crawl in between those black lines of print, the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep” (30). Metaphor creates situations like mine over and over again, and it activates the subconscious and evokes a reader’s real life memories and circumstances causing inspirational moments that produce an increased level of physical action with readers. With metaphor, we do not simply mull over a text; we dig our feet deep into the sand and explore the unknown within both the text and ourselves.

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