

# The Emperor of Ice-Cream



## POEM TEXT

- 1 Call the roller of big cigars,  
2 The muscular one, and bid him whip  
3 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
4 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
5 As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
6 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
7 Let be be finale of seem.  
8 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.
- 9 Take from the dresser of deal,  
10 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
11 On which she embroidered fantails once  
12 And spread it so as to cover her face.  
13 If her horny feet protrude, they come  
14 To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
15 Let the lamp affix its beam.  
16 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

precisely—indeed, that’s probably deliberate on Stevens’s part—but the poem definitely presents a [juxtaposition](#) between the way things *appear* to be and the way things actually *are*. The mysterious speaker of the poem seems to construct an argument in favor of acknowledging reality—including the finality of death—over being deceived by illusory appearances.

The poem takes place at a wake or funeral, with preparations taking place in what appears to be someone’s home. The first stanza is about making these ritualistic preparations for the ceremony, while the second stanza discusses how to handle the dead body (revealed to be that of an old woman). In both sections, the speaker fixates on the contrast between “being” and “seeming”—between reality and appearances.

For example, the speaker tells the “wenches” to put on the “dress [...] they are used to wear.” The word “wenches” might refer female servants, prostitutes, or simply girls; in any case, these are implied to be working-class women whose typical “dress” wouldn’t be fancy. Flowers, meanwhile, should be brought wrapped in “last month’s newspapers.”

These two instructions perhaps reflect the speaker’s wish to strip any illusory appearances from reality. That is, the women shouldn’t dress in a way that is somehow different, and the flowers similarly don’t require fancy ribbons or wrapping paper. In fact, the flowers’ covering might even be thought of as actually capturing reality, as the newspapers report actual events. The poem suggests that there’s no real benefit to dressing things up to *seem* better than they *are*—especially in the face of death (again, this all takes place at a wake or funeral of some sort).

This idea is strengthened by the last two lines of the first stanza: “Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.” The first of these two lines addresses this theme head on: let “be” (how things actually are) “be” the “finale” (the ending) of “seem” (false appearances). In other words, let reality dispel the magic of illusions. Perhaps this relates to death, with the speaker expressing the way that death, as life’s only real certainty, strips away any world of appearances that people might construct for themselves during their earthly lives.

The repeated line about the “emperor of ice cream” also seems to strengthen this reading. An “emperor of ice-cream” is a kind of [oxymoron](#): emperors are supposed to be mighty, powerful figures, meaning that being an emperor of *ice-cream* sounds like a kind of joke title. This might be similar to the fable of the emperor’s new clothes, suggesting that power is itself a kind of illusion (and therefore an *appearance* that needs to be replaced by *reality*).

The speaker’s instructions for the handling of the dead body



## SUMMARY

Bring in the big strong man who makes cigars, and tell him to get to work making ice cream from lusty curds of milk. Tell the women they can wear whatever they normally wear, and tell the boys to bring flowers wrapped up in old newspaper. Let reality triumph over illusion. There’s only one real emperor: the emperor of ice cream.

Inside a drawer of the pine dresser (which is missing three of its glass knobs) you’ll find a bedsheet belonging to the dead woman, one which she herself stitched with elaborate patterns. Lay it over her body and make sure her face is covered. If her feet (with their bunions and toes like horns) stick out at the bottom, it’s just to remind us that she’s cold and dead. Fix the lamplight on her in full glare. There’s only one real emperor—the emperor of ice cream.



## THEMES



### REALITY VS. APPEARANCES

“The Emperor of Ice Cream” is one of Wallace Stevens’s most famous *and* most notoriously ambiguous poems. It’s hard to pin down the poem’s themes

also contribute to this implicit argument against illusory appearances. Though the speaker wants the body to be covered with “embroidered fantails” (a decorative sheet) as a kind of tribute to the woman, it doesn’t matter whether it fully covers her. If her feet poke out, then so be it; they are simply a reflection of the stark reality that this woman is “cold,” dead, and “dumb.”

Accordingly, the “lamp” should “affix its beam”—it should cast an unflinching light on reality for all to see. And as if to underscore this point, the poem then repeats its key line: “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.” People shouldn’t put so much emphasis on appearances, the poem suggests, and should instead embrace the reality of life, death, and who they are.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-8
- Lines 9-16



### LIFE, DEATH, AND SENSUALITY

Though it’s not spelled out explicitly, “The Emperor of Ice Cream” appears to suggest that life is fleeting and, because of that, precious. The poem often focuses on life’s sensuality—the experience and pleasure of the world as known through the senses, such as taste. It opposes that sensuality to the “cold” and numbness of death. In doing so, it gently nudges its readers to contemplate this opposition. That is, the poem seems to argue for the importance of living life to its fullest, because death is inevitable. Savoring joy and pleasure—eating that delicious “ice-cream”—is thus all that really matters.

The poem takes place at a wake (an obvious representation of death) but everything about the speaker’s instructions for the wake celebrates the sensuous pleasures of being alive. In particular, the poem’s focus on ice cream foregrounds the importance of sensory enjoyment. Indeed, the first instruction issued by the speaker is to fetch a strong cigar-maker—“the muscular one.” The mention of the man’s muscles has sexual undertones, which is likewise supported by the presence of “wenches,” a sexually loaded and archaic term for women. In this way, then, the kitchen scene of the poem is subtly governed by the presence of sensual and sexual pleasure.

Yet this pleasure won’t last forever. After all, cigars burn out, ice cream melts. Like sex, these suggest a fleeting, precious kind of enjoyment. **Ironically**, the dead body in the poem does the opposite of ice cream, easily becoming cold. Ice cream, then, is a complicated **symbol**. On one hand, it speaks to life’s sensual pleasure. On the other hand, in linking with the “cold” dead body, it represents the knowledge of inevitable death, which creates the need to embrace sensuality in the first place.

The speaker’s other instructions also link sensuality with the vividness of life. The image of “flowers in last month’s

newspapers” contrasts symbols of life’s briefness and beauty—flowers—with the discarded waste of the past: newspapers. Again, this can be read as a subtle argument in favor of valuing life through the enjoyment of the senses. In other words, it’s worth stopping to smell the flowers, since time inevitably marches forward and everything will eventually become old news.

This idea also applies to the use of the specific bedsheet for covering the body. The dead woman, when she was alive, once engaged in a kind of sensory pleasure: the embroidery of beautiful patterning (“fantails”). This embroidery was an aesthetic pursuit not necessary to the cloth itself. Mentioning the embroidery acknowledges the worth of this kind of human activity, which is motivated by beauty rather than just survival.

Additionally, one of the most engaging aspects of the poem is its beautiful use of sound patterning through **consonance**, **assonance**, and **alliteration**. This is established right from the beginning, as the mysterious speaker begins the instructions for the servants. The /l/ consonance in the first line, the /i/ assonance in lines 2-3, and many other examples throughout the poem are *in themselves* sensuous events, pleasing to the reader’s ear. These sounds help build a vivid picture of a scene alive with sensuality.

In this reading, then, the “emperor” of the poem’s title doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with power and authority in the usual sense. This isn’t a real emperor, perhaps, but a **personification** of the love of sensuous beauty and pleasure, of celebrating life in all its fleeting glory. The speaker states emphatically that all other emperors pale in comparison to the “emperor of ice cream.” No amount of power, the poem suggests, can compare to the power of one’s own senses.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Line 8
- Lines 10-12
- Lines 13-14
- Line 16



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.*

“The Emperor of Ice Cream” opens by immediately establishing its imperative voice—the speaker’s instructions using present-tense verbs like “Call,” “bid,” “Let,” and so on. This gives the poem a ceremonial atmosphere right from the start, the speaker taking on the role of organizer for some kind of ritual

(which gradually reveals itself to be a funeral or wake). The first instruction, then, is issued in lines 1-3. Here, the speaker summons the "roller of big cigars" (a "muscular" man). He then says that the man should be instructed ("bid him") to start making ice cream ("concupiscent curds") for the funeral/wake.

Even just in the space of three lines, the poem introduces a number of its key features, in addition to the imperative voice. One of the poem's major themes is finding a kind of aesthetic pleasure in everyday experience, and the poem's language is tuned precisely to make the poem itself, in its way, delicious. So the first line goes straight in with prominent [consonance](#) and a little [assonance](#), while lines 2 and 3 add [alliteration](#) and much more consonance and assonance too. This involves /l/, /g/, /r/, /k/, /p/, /n/, /s/, and short /i/ sounds

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.

Stevens's poetry often delights in the sound of language, and the poem is just as concerned with this kind of pursuit as it is with any literal meaning. This amounts to a *performance* of sensuality—after all, even a funeral is a kind of show.

"[C]oncupiscent curds" is Stevens's deliberately gaudy way of saying ice cream, which is one of the poem's main [symbols](#). The word "concupiscent" relates to sexual desire, which also ties in with the innuendo of "big cigars" (hinting at male genitalia). And "curds" are coagulated bits of milk used in cheesemaking. Here, they're meant to poetically suggest the thick sensuousness of ice cream. Additionally, while ice cream is cold to the touch—like the dead woman's body—it also symbolizes a kind of revelry in the senses, with its sweet and thrillingly cold taste. It also—like life—doesn't tend to last that long!

These links aren't intended to be explicit, but instead hum away in the background of the poem as the reader makes their way from line to line. Stevens himself thought the point of this poem was to make people conscious of "the excitement of reality"—and there's definitely something visceral and exciting about the way these three lines begin.

#### LINES 4-6

*Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.*

Lines 3-6 follow a similar formula to the opening three lines. In a continuation of the imperative voice, the speaker issues further instructions for the funeral or wake of the dead woman (whom the reader doesn't encounter until the second stanza).

Here, the speaker instructs that the "wenches" shouldn't dress for the funeral in anything other than what they would usually wear: "Let the wenches dawdle in such dress / As they are used to wear." This starts to develop one of the poem's key themes:

the difference between reality and appearances, and the importance of paying attention to reality itself. *Wenches* is an archaic word that can mean "young women," "young female servants," or "prostitutes," sometimes with a negative tone. These "wenches" are, by implication, lower or working class girls, which perhaps helps offer some clue as to the poem's setting. That is, though the poem celebrates the sensuous joys present in everyday life, the actual everyday life that it portrays is not one that depends on great wealth and riches.

The [alliteration](#) in line 4 between "dawdle" and "dress" is cleverly delayed by the two intervening words, which suggests the act of "dawdling" itself—wasting time or being slow. It's interesting here to note that, though the speaker has very specific requests about how everything ought to be arranged, the speaker isn't necessarily hurried. Rather, letting people and things be themselves seems to be the order of the day.

After the [caesura](#) in line 5, the speaker issues the next instruction, which also uses the imperative verb "Let" (a word which crops up no less than four times). Another group of young people—"the boys"—are now instructed to "bring flowers in last month's newspapers." The ritualistic use of flowers is typical of funerals, but the instruction to dress them up in "last month's newspapers" is not. The image contrasts brief and beautiful [symbols](#) of life—flowers—with the discarded waste of the past—newspapers. At the same time, it also highlights that this is not the funeral of someone with wealth and riches.

#### LINES 7-8

*Let be be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

Lines 7 and 8 represent a vital moment in the poem's thematic development. Whereas the speaker's instructions up until now have had concrete aims—serve ice cream, bring flowers—line 7 is a shift into something more abstract. Really, this is the crux of the poem. The speaker sets up two opposites: *being* and *seeming*. These can be thought of as *reality* and *appearance*. In this poem, Stevens doesn't define these two terms, nor specify the difference between them (in fact, he spent his whole career trying to come to terms with this exact distinction). Roughly speaking, though, this poem firmly argues in favor of confronting *reality itself*.

That's not to say that reality doesn't *contain* appearances too—rather, the poem is arguing that, in Stevens's own words, people "should take life as [they] find it." There is beauty and pleasure to be found in everyday experience, but trying to making things appear different than they are disconnects people from the immediate world around them. That's why this poem both feels decadent *and* commonplace—it's a kind of ritualistic celebration of the *extraordinary* contained within the ordinary.

The [end-stop](#) at the end of line 7 gives the reader time to really

consider what it means to "Let be be finale of seem." The [assonant](#) /ee/ sounds also lend this line extra weight. Essentially, the speaker is saying: let being put an end (a "finale") to seeming. Let people confront and enjoy reality itself.

There's something Shakespearean about the play of grammar and words here, particularly in the [epizeuxis](#), or immediate [repetition](#), of "be." While the poem as a whole seems to have borrowed some of its tone and playful language from Shakespeare, lines 7-8 specifically seem to contain a subtle [allusion](#) to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Two moments from that play seem relevant here. At one point in the play, Hamlet says "Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'" Like the speaker in this poem, this is a refusal to accept illusory appearance and a deliberate effort to talk about things as they actually are.

Elsewhere in the play, Hamlet says "Your worm is your only emperor for diet." Essentially, he's saying that death shows that power is illusory—because both kings and paupers get eaten by worms in the grave. In Stevens's poem, of course, the only emperor is "the emperor of ice-cream." All people, rich and poor, are united in their enjoyment of sensuous pleasures, such as ice cream. As with the poem more generally, there is no one definitive way to interpret this phrase. Ice cream, though, is an appropriate [symbol](#) for the poem's argument in favor of the sensuousness and beauty contained in everyday experience—it has a pleasurable taste but also melts if left out. It's a little like life itself—short-lived and intense.

This poem, then, seems to say that the only real power is the power of everyday experience. The end-stop at the end of line 8 makes this feel like the poem's rhetorical height, which only serves to deepen the line's mysteriousness. Furthermore, the [diacope](#) of "emperor" seems to strip the word of its original power. Just as Hamlet argues that both kings and peasants are eaten by worms in the grave, Stevens's speaker suggests that all humans are united by a love of sensual pleasure. The "emperor of ice-cream," a [personification](#) of this love, thus has the largest empire of all.

### LINES 9-12

*Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once  
And spread it so as to cover her face.*

Line 9 marks the start of the second stanza, which subtly shifts the focus of the poem from the vibrancy of being alive to the brute reality death. The two stanzas represent this contrast through their different settings, which are not explicitly stated but hinted at by corresponding objects. The "kitchen cups" in the first stanza suggest the hustle and bustle of a busy home kitchen as people prepare for the funeral/wake, while the second stanza seems to be a more private interior, such as a bedroom. Indeed, the speaker now seems to be in the presence of the dead woman.

Lines 9-13 comprise one long instruction, telling some unseen servant or helper to retrieve one of the woman's sheets from the "dresser of deal," ("deal" is a type of wood), so that her face can be covered up (presumably as a mark of respect). The poem maintains its imperative voice ("Take") and its decorative sound elements (like the [alliteration](#) in "dresser of deal"). The fact that the "dresser" (a chest of drawers) is missing three of its "glass knobs" is a reminder that the woman wasn't wealthy. It also suggests the way that death is always kind of messy. That is, the dead always leave some of their to-do list undone.

In these lines, the poem also suggests that the speaker was quite well acquainted with the dead woman. The speaker calls for a *specific* sheet—the one which the woman had once embroidered with fantails. The fact that she embroidered it herself, rather than just buying an expensive sheet from the store, again suggests that she was not a rich woman. This sheet has additional significance because the woman herself worked on it to improve its aesthetic quality—to make it more beautiful. This neatly reinforces the poem's argument in favor of embracing the sensuousness and beauty of everyday experience.

### LINES 13-14

*If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.*

Lines 13 and 14 represent a kind of direct confrontation with death. Here, the speaker says that, should the sheet not be long enough to cover both the woman's face *and* her feet, then to let the feet "protrude" (stick out). Indeed, her feet are there to show her sheer deadness—they are ice-cold (like ice cream!) and stationary. The "horny" quality of the woman's feet probably refers to corns and bunions, as well as how her cold dead toes look like tiny horns. Of course, "horny" and "come" also play with the sexual suggestiveness of the first stanza.

Stevens uses two [caesurae](#) in these lines:

*If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.*

These caesurae cleverly mimic the way that the woman's feet stick out from under the sheet. In each of these lines, the speaker describes the body, then after the caesura adds two words that stick out just like the woman's feet. The similarity between lines 13 and 14 suggests that this is a deliberate visual effect.

These lines also make effective use of sound patterning:

*If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.*

The two /t/ sounds stick out among the [assonant](#) /ee/ and /o/ vowels, and the soft-sounding "come" and "dumb," just as the

feet stick out of the sheet. The [end-stop](#) after "dumb" creates silence after the word, evoking the presence of a deep and eerie quiet in the room (as opposed to the commotion in the kitchen during the first stanza).

## LINES 15-16

*Let the lamp affix its beam.*

*The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

The poem's concluding two lines form a [couplet](#) that mirrors the last two lines of the first stanza, acting as a [refrain](#). Indeed, line 15 begins with the same imperative verb ("Let") as lines 7 and 4, making it a kind of long-distance [anaphora](#).

In line 15, the speaker issues the final instruction of the poem:

Let the lamp affix its beam.

The line is subtly packed with [alliteration](#), [assonance](#), and [consonance](#). This gives the impression of something coming into focus under a strong light, the sounds becoming more obvious in the way that a lamp illuminates an object—in this case, the dead woman's body. Notice how, in essence, this line is saying the same thing as its partner line in the first stanza (line 7). Both are asking the reader to do away with "seeming" and stare reality in the face—"Let the lamp affix its beam," so even death can be seen in full clarity. The two lines even end in the same sound, "seem" and "beam," like a rhyme with seven lines in between!

The last line, of course, is an exact repetition of line 8. This somehow makes it seem both more important *and* more like nonsense. That is, Stevens arguably resists giving the reader any simple message to take away from the poem—the poem is as much about enjoying sounds and images as it is about making sense. So, this line could be read either as doubling down on its prior meaning, or as intentionally farcical.

This ambiguity is part of the poem's power. Perhaps "the emperor of ice-cream" is a surreal [personification](#) of everyday experience. The phrase could then be interpreted as applying specifically to life in the first stanza, and to death in the second. In this reading, both the commotion of the kitchen and stasis of the woman's dead body are proof of the concept that there's nothing beyond what people actively experience. Perhaps, too, it highlights the absence of God from the scene. Instead of God, the Christian *Lord*, there is instead the "emperor of ice-cream." Instead of angelic choirs in the afterlife, there is only this life of "big cigars," "horny feet," and of course "ice-cream."

Placed at the end of both stanzas, ice cream seems to [symbolize](#) both the vividness of being alive *and* the brute cold reality of being dead. Of course, much of this is open to the reader's interpretation—which is why this continues to be one of the most widely debated and analyzed poems of the 20th century!



## SYMBOLS



### ICE CREAM

Ice cream is, of course, at the heart of this poem. Roughly speaking, it [symbolizes](#) the sensual pleasures of life.

The poem opens with the mysterious speaker issuing an instruction to fetch the "muscular" man who has the strength required to make the ice cream. It's possible that the poem is situated in—or inspired by—Stevens's numerous business trips to Florida. There are stories which are hard to verify—though they were even put forward by Stevens's friend and fellow poet [Elizabeth Bishop](#)—that ice cream was traditionally served at funerals in Key West.

But the truth—or lack of it—about the presence of ice cream at funerals is not really relevant to the reader's experience of the poem. This funeral/wake *does* feature ice cream, and throughout the poem ice cream is imbued with a sense of symbolic importance. Ice cream is a strong and sensuous experience, its sweetness and coldness generally viewed as something pleasurable. In this sense, then, ice cream seems to encapsulate the poem's subtle argument about being alive—living is all there is, and then you die, so you might as well fully engage with what you experience. Ice cream *also* represents the fleeting nature of life in the sense that it easily melts away if left out at room temperature.

It's also worth thinking about why Stevens uses the curious phrase "emperor of ice-cream." Ultimately, the poem seems to be suggesting that power—and indeed, everything people tell themselves about who they are—is a kind of fiction. The *only* reality is what people experience in life, and so ultimately lived experience—the pulse and glow of day-to-day life—is the only real authority.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "and bid him whip / In kitchen cups concupiscent curds."
- **Line 8:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."
- **Line 16:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."



### CLOTHES AND SHEETS

In both stanzas of "The Emperor of Ice Cream" there is a mention of clothing or covering. In both instances, the speaker emphasizes the modesty of these garments, which [symbolize](#) life as it is, as opposed to illusions people might have about life.

That's why, then, the mysterious speaker issues the instruction for the young women ("wenches") to wear what they usually wear. Let them be as they are, in other words—they don't need

to pretend to be something else just for the sake of this funeral. Likewise, the dead woman's body should be covered—but if the sheet isn't long enough to stop her "horny feet" from sticking out, it really doesn't matter. Her cold, dead-still feet demonstrate a key part of life and reality: death. There's no point trying to cover up the fact that everyone is going to die. Interestingly, then, acceptance of death becomes a kind of way to embrace life.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Let the wenches dawdle in such dress / As they are used to wear"
- **Lines 10-14:** "that sheet / On which she embroidered fantails once / And spread it so as to cover her face. / If her horny feet protrude, they come / To show how cold she is, and dumb."



### FLOWERS IN NEWSPAPER

In the poem, flowers [symbolize](#) the beauty and briefness of life. Meanwhile, the old newspapers they're wrapped in symbolize all that's illusory about the human world. The poem doesn't dwell on the flowers for very long, but it's worth noting just how specific the speaker's instructions about them really are. Presumably, the flowers are a necessary part of the funeral/wake—a common way to mark respect for the dead. But the speaker *specifically* asks for them to be brought in "last month's newspapers." This image, then, contrasts brief and beautiful symbols of life—flowers—with the discarded waste of the past—newspapers.

Overall, the poem argues that death is a certainty, which means that what's most real about life is sensual experience. Things like power and authority are *fictions* (one of Stevens's favorite words to describe how humans interpret the world). So, embracing everyday lived experience is a kind of way to embrace the only reality that there actually is—the senses.

Following this logic, the literal old news that wraps the flowers symbolizes the illusory side of life—the pretension that there is anything *other* than what is actually experienced on a day-to-day, immediate level. All those things that probably seemed so important a month ago are now just mere wrapping paper for the thing that really is important: vivid, vibrant, pulsating, fleeting life in form of the flowers.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "let the boys / Bring flowers in last month's newspapers."



## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is a major feature of "The Emperor of Ice Cream." Its main function overall is to bring out the beauty of everyday things, which helps make the poem's case in favor of the sensuousness of daily life.

Though "big" and "bid" across lines 1 and 2 chime together alliteratively, the first main example is in line 3:

In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.

There's nothing subtle about the alliteration here. It exerts great force on the line, relating to the "muscular" man who comes to make the ice cream. It is deliberately what Stevens would call "gaudy," what modern day readers might think of as tacky and extravagant. It's as though the line takes delight in its own sound, subtly reinforcing the poem's point about the vitality of everyday experience. This alliteration also captures the repetitive work of churning ice cream.

In line 4, "dawdle" and "dress" alliterate to suggest decadence and, in the way that the two words are separated by two intervening words, the slowness of dawdling. These moments, and even the mention of the "boys" who "bring" flowers, all have sexual undertones that are in part aided by the alliterative sound. The poem seems to draw a link between being alive and the possibility of sexual, or "concupiscent," encounters.

In line 9, "dresser of deal" suggests how the poem's interest in beautification applies even to humble objects. This "dresser" is made of "deal," or cheap pine wood, yet even this modest, utilitarian object is shown to be beautiful through the speaker's use of alliteration. The device captures how people's senses give them access to the beauty of ordinary things.

Meanwhile, the /l/ alliteration in line 15 between "let" and "lamp" seems to be more about fixing the line with particular sounds, like an image coming into sharper focus (in this case, the poem's image of a dead woman). Here, alliteration shows how—for all the poem's gaudiness—it is also incredibly precise.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "big"
- **Line 2:** "bid"
- **Line 3:** "kitchen cups concupiscent curds"
- **Line 4:** "wenches dawdle," "dress"
- **Line 5:** "wear," "let," "boys"
- **Line 6:** "Bring flowers," "last"
- **Line 7:** "Let be be finale"
- **Line 9:** "dresser," "deal"
- **Line 10:** "the three," "that sheet"
- **Line 11:** "she," "fantails"

- **Line 12:** “spread,” “so,” “cover,” “face”
- **Line 13:** “her horny feet,” “come”
- **Line 14:** “show,” “cold she”
- **Line 15:** “Let,” “lamp”

## ASSONANCE

Like [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), [assonance](#) is an important feature in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” It serves a key purpose by heightening the sensuousness of the poem itself. That’s because the poem is in part about embracing the sensuous vitality of everyday experience—including the reader’s experience of reading the poem!

Notice how the uniform assonance of “bid him whip / In kitchen cups” in lines 2-3 pre-empts the prominent alliteration that follows. This all ties in with the “muscular” man who comes to whip up the ice cream, the repetitive sounds evoking his physical effort. Later in the stanza, assonance also contributes to the poem’s sensuous language: “Let,” “wenches,” and “dress” in line 4. All in all, moments like these contribute to the poem’s vibrant language, supporting the poem’s argument that people should pay attention to their immediate experiences, whether of ice cream or extravagant language.

Then, in one of the poem’s key lines (line 7), long /e/ sounds are used for extra emphasis:

Let be be finale of seem.

The repeating vowels make the line seem final and authoritative, which is in keeping with the speaker’s imperative tone. The speaker provides no justification for the assertion that “be” should triumph over “seem,” instead relying on the power of sound to convince the reader of this statement’s truth.

Line 7’s sister line, line 15, which occurs at the same place in the second stanza, uses assonance to similar effect:

Let the lamp affix its beam.

The shared vowel sounds are the poem’s way of representing something coming into focus, in this case evoking the glare of light on the dead woman’s body—evoking an unflinching confrontation with the reality of death.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “big cigars”
- **Line 2:** “muscular one,” “bid him whip”
- **Line 3:** “In kitchen”
- **Line 4:** “Let,” “wenches,” “dress”
- **Line 6:** “flowers,” “newspapers”
- **Line 7:** “Let be be finale,” “seem”

- **Line 9:** “deal”
- **Line 10:** “Lacking,” “three glass knobs,” “that sheet”
- **Line 11:** “On,” “she,” “fantails”
- **Line 12:** “face”
- **Line 13:** “horny feet protrude”
- **Line 14:** “show,” “cold she”
- **Line 15:** “the,” “affix its beam”

## ALLUSION

The [allusion](#) in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” is subtly done, but lines 7 and 8 seem to link the poem to Shakespeare’s [Hamlet](#). In a way, the poem as a whole could even be seen as a kind of response to the character of Hamlet. In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet struggles to find the meaning of life and human action. Meanwhile, Stevens’s poem seems to say there is no meaning in life apart from life itself—“Let be be finale of seem.” Let being, or reality, overcome illusory appearances. Generally speaking, the poem has a kind of Shakespearean tone with its use of imperatives (common in Shakespeare’s soliloquies) and use of sound patterning ([alliteration](#), [consonance](#) and so on).

More specifically, lines 7 and 8 (and the [repetition](#) of line 7 at line 16) each suggest certain lines in *Hamlet*. At one point in the play, Hamlet also seems to reject illusory appearances in favor of reality: “Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems.’” In other words, Hamlet says that he doesn’t even know what appearances are—he only knows what *is*, what’s real.

Elsewhere, Hamlet says that “Your worm is your only emperor for diet.” This line essentially means that everyone is made equal by death, since both kings and beggars ultimately decompose and are eaten by worms. So, earthly power in life is a kind of illusion. Once a body becomes a corpse, the *real* emperor—the real power—is the worm who gets to eat it. Similarly, Stevens’s “emperor of ice-cream” is the “only emperor” because all humans take pleasure in the senses, such as when they’re eating ice cream. The empire of ice cream, then, extends to all human beings—the largest empire in the world.

### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** “Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.”
- **Line 16:** “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.”

## CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is a minor feature in “The Emperor of Ice Cream.”

The first caesura occurs in line 2 after “The muscular one.” This puts the phrase in its own little section, perhaps evoking the way that this cigar roller imposes himself on physical space. The caesura also adds a halting kind of rhythm to the opening lines, keeping the reader on their toes as this unusual scene takes

place. In contrast, the caesura in line 5 allows for a longer sentence to stretch from line 4 to line 6, contrasting with the previous short phrase. This longer sentence becomes a mouthful, just like the big cup of ice cream the man is whipping up. Similarly, the caesura in line 10 also helps facilitate the poem's agile syntax.

The most significant caesurae are probably those in lines 13 and 14:

If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Each of these caesurae divides its line in pretty much the same place, with two monosyllabic words coming after. This cleverly mimics the way that the woman's feet stick out from under her covering sheet, perhaps even to the extent that each word—or pair of words—represents one of her feet.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “
- **Line 5:** “
- **Line 10:** “
- **Line 13:** “
- **Line 14:** “

## CONSONANCE

"The Emperor of Ice Cream" is full of [consonance](#) (as well as similar devices like [assonance](#) and [alliteration](#)). One of Stevens's main reasons for the consonance is to make the poem itself an enticing experience. If the poem is in some way about the acceptance and embrace of reality over appearances, then making the poem itself a vivid read contributes to this argument.

Consonance is used from the first line onwards, as the poem announces its exuberant mode of address:

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.

These lines are so full of consonance (/l/, /b/, /g/, /s/, /m/, /n/, /c/, /d/, and /p/ sounds) that it becomes an almost physical presence on the page, evoking the imposing figure of the large muscular man summoned by the speaker to make the ice cream. Indeed, this physicality also suggests the exertion required to "whip" up ice cream.

Lines 4-6 are full of /s/ and /z/ consonance (also known as [sibilance](#)):

Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys

Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.

This has a whispery, seductive kind of sound that fits in with the first stanza's undertones of sex and desire ("concupiscent").

The next key example is line 13 (quoted with 14):

If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.

Notice how these two /t/ sounds look and sound almost out of place—the other sounds are much softer and quieter ("dumber," perhaps). The /t/ consonance, then, sticks out like the dead woman's feet themselves!

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16

## END-STOPPED LINE

There are nine [end-stopped](#) lines in "The Emperor of Ice Cream"—five in the first stanza, four in the second. Generally speaking, they help control the poem's ebb and flow, making sure that the poem's flowery and flamboyant [diction](#) doesn't run away with itself.

At the end of line 3, the end-stop is suggestive of physical efforts, as though the full-stop imposes a sudden muscularity on the poem. This both hints at the large man who whips the ice cream, and the physical effort required for him to do so.

In line 12, the end-stop comes after the speaker has issued instructions about how to cover up the dead woman's face. This creates a brief pause for reflection, and perhaps even respect for the dead. It may even be a pause that allows for the speaker to figure out the next instruction. The end-stop after "dumb" in line 14 also evokes this kind of silence.

Lines 6-8 in the first stanza and 14-16 in the second are all end-stopped. Both examples make the poem feel suddenly more like an [elegy](#), or mournful poem for someone who has died, as

though the poem too is coming to a rest. The full-stops make these lines feel very final, and indeed these feel like the most important of the speaker's various instructions throughout the poem. The speaker's proclamations seem all the more dramatic and authoritative.

Besides these, the rest of the lines of the poem are [enjambéd](#), requiring the lines below them in order to complete their meaning. For instance, line 9-12 are enjambéd, each grammatically linked to the next. This spread-out quality mimics the action the poem describes, spreading "that sheet / On which she embroidered fantails once [...] so as to cover her face." The lines take on a jumbled feel, almost as if they don't fit correctly in the poem—just as the woman's sheet fits awkwardly over her, not covering her feet completely.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cigars,"
- **Line 3:** "curds."
- **Line 6:** "newspapers."
- **Line 7:** "seem."
- **Line 8:** "ice-cream."
- **Line 12:** "face."
- **Line 14:** "dumb."
- **Line 15:** "beam."
- **Line 16:** "ice-cream."

## REPETITION

[Repetition](#) is used in various forms during "The Emperor of Ice Cream." Firstly, it's part of the speaker's extremely unusual [tone](#) and [diction](#). Indeed, the prominent use of rhetorical devices combined with the imperative voice (the way that the speaker barks instructions) is reminiscent of Shakespeare's dramatic work.

Throughout the poem, the speaker tells people what to do—perhaps servants in the nearby area, other funeral-goers, or even the reader. One of these imperative verbs is repeated—"Let"—appearing four times in the poem (this kind of repetition at the beginning of different sentences is known as [anaphora](#)). Such repetition places special importance on the word, hinting that the poem is in part about accepting the fundamental nature of existence—the stark inevitability of death—and embracing life without indulgent illusion. "Let the lamp affix its beam"—in other words, let things be seen as they really are.

A few other forms of repetition appear in the poem. Line 7 uses [epizeuxis](#) in its immediate repetition of "be." "Be" here is used both as an abstract noun and as a verb, making this an instance of [polyptoton](#), in which a word is repeated in different forms, as well. This allows the poem to state its central argument: that one should embrace reality ("be") instead of illusory appearances ("seem"). Furthermore, by using "be" both as a

noun and a verb, the speaker suggests that reality isn't just a thing, it's an action, a way of living. Embracing reality means *doing things* like making ice cream, embroidering sheets, or exploring sexuality.

Line 8 repeats the poem's title, and this line is in turn repeated at the poem's end, acting as a [refrain](#). This line itself contains another form of repetition: [diacope](#) (the repetition of a word or phrase with one or more intervening words). This repetition seems to help the poem call into question what it means to be an "emperor"—that is, to show that the concept of *being* an emperor is somehow strange and illusory. The *only* real emperor is the one of "ice-cream," a statement which borders on nonsense but seems to suggest that there is no power apart from that of daily, lived experience.

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Let"
- **Line 5:** "let"
- **Line 7:** "Let," "be be"
- **Line 8:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."
- **Line 15:** "Let"
- **Line 16:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."

## PERSONIFICATION

The "emperor of ice-cream" is a [personification](#) of the pleasure humans take in sensuous experience. This "emperor" isn't necessarily a real person, but rather a poetic, even humorous way of talking about the power that the immediate senses hold over people.

All emperors rule over the people who live in their empires, but human empires always have borders, limiting the power of their rulers. However, the "emperor of ice-cream" has no borders—all humans have senses, and all humans can take pleasure in their immediate experiences. So, all humans are subject to this sweet, milky emperor.

As discussed in the allusion section of this guide, the "emperor of ice-cream" subtly alludes to a line from Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#): "Your worm is your only emperor for diet." Both kings and beggars decompose and get eaten by worms—and if worms eat kings, that means that worms have more power than kings. In other words, everyone is equalized by death. Stevens's lighthearted twist replaces worms with ice cream. In this new formulation, it's sensuous experience that equalizes people. After all, everyone—from presidents to toddlers—likes ice cream.

The poem unites all these ideas and references under the guise of a fictional entity, "the emperor of ice-cream." This was a common strategy for Stevens throughout his work. He created characters with striking, often comic names to personify his ideas, setting those ideas in motion and making them memorable for readers. Judging by how popular this poem has

remained, it's a strategy that often worked!

#### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."
- **Line 16:** "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."



## VOCABULARY

**Bid** (Line 2) - Tell, ask, command.

**Concupiscent** (Line 3) - Lustful, full of sexual desire.

**Curds** (Line 3) - This refers to the ice cream making process. Curds are coagulated bits of milk, used in making cheese. Although making ice cream involves cream or milk, rather than curds, the speaker uses poetic license here to evoke the physicality of ice cream. Additionally, "curds" also suggest fruit curds, such as lemon curd, a kind of custard.

**Wenches** (Line 4) - This is an archaic, sometimes derogatory, word that can mean "young women," "barmaids," or "prostitutes."

**Dawdle** (Line 4) - Move slowly, waste time.

**Finale** (Line 7) - The ending. Often used in relation to music, e.g. the grand finale of the symphony.

**Dresser** (Line 9) - Chest of drawers.

**Deal** (Line 9) - A type of wood.

**Embroidered** (Line 11) - Embroidery is the craft of decorating fabric by hand through sewing.

**Fantails** (Line 11) - There's no simpler way to put it!—fan-shaped tails.

**Horny Feet** (Line 13) - Feet covered in corns and bunions. This phrase also suggests how toes on the dead foot look like little horns.

**Protrude** (Line 13) - Stick out.

**Dumb** (Line 14) - Silent; unable to speak.

**Affix** (Line 15) - Fix upon, i.e. the lamp should focus its glare on the dead body.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Emperor of Ice-cream" is composed of two equal-length stanzas. Each stanza has eight lines, a form known as an octave or octet. This form is an important aspect of the poem, dividing the speaker's and reader's experience neatly into two. The word "stanza" can also mean "room"—and Stevens definitely plays on this meaning by having two distinct interiors in each stanza. Additionally, lines 7 and 8 and the final two lines act as a

kind of [refrain](#), with lines 8 and 16 repeating exactly, and lines 7 and 15 both starting with "Let" and ending on a rhyme with "ice-cream."

The first room or stanza seems to be a kitchen in which frantic preparations for the wake are taking place. The speaker orchestrates these preparations, and in general the first stanza seems full of vibrant, unfiltered life. Line 7-8 are a little different from the rest of the first stanza, essentially summing up the speaker's observations and thoughts in abstract terms. There is a logical leap from the muscular cigar maker, the wenches, and the boys to the speaker's mysterious proclamations:

Let be be finale of seem.

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Of course, it's up to the reader to decide how these two lines relate to what's come before.

The second stanza uses a similar set-up, and seems to take place in the woman's bedroom. Lines 9-14 deal in concrete details, and lines 15-16 offer a kind of summary or commentary. This stanza—or room—is much quieter, and is full of death rather than life. *Both* stanzas, however, lead the speaker to the same conclusion—that "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream."

### METER

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is written in a very loose [iambic tetrameter](#) (four [stresses](#) in a da-DUM pattern), with most lines offering some kind of variation. Additionally, the final two lines of each stanza deviate from this meter, employing [trimeter](#) (three stresses) followed by [hexameter](#) or heptameter (six or seven stresses). Generally speaking, the poem's [meter](#) is often off-kilter, so that the poem by turns reads as exuberant, uneasy, or sober.

There are a few specific instances of particular note. For example, look at the clunky array of stresses in lines 2 and 3, and how they suggest the "muscular[ity]" of the man who "whip[s]" the ice-cream:

The mus- | cular one, | and bid | him whip  
In kit- | chen cups | concu | piscent | curds.

The poem substitutes an [anapest](#) (da-da-DUM) for an iamb in line 2, and then in the next line introduces an extra stress—including two stresses right next to each other. Coupled with the line's /k/ [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#), these lines are a mouthful. They're almost exhausting to read! This suggests the physical exertion required to make the ice cream.

As these examples show, the poem isn't afraid to deviate considerably from its meter. Some lines have five stresses, such as line 5, which is a straightforward example of iambic

[pentameter](#) (five stresses a line). Line 9, meanwhile has three stresses composed of looping [dactyls](#) (DUM-da-da):

Take from the | dresser of | deal,

Lines like these are very attentive to rhythm, while they also refuse to conform to the monotony of a steady meter.

The truest line of iambic tetrameter comes in line 14:

To show | how cold | she is, | and dumb.

Steady iambs can sometimes sound quite solemn, and that seems to be the deliberate effect here. This is the poem's starkest moment, its clearest confrontation with the reality of death. The tone of the steady iambs seems fitting, perhaps hinting at the steadiness of a funeral march, or the slow, synchronized steps of coffin-bearers.

Additionally, each stanza's second-to-last line is written in trimeter rather than tetrameter, containing one less stress. Here are lines 7 and 15:

Let be | be fina- | le of seem.

Let | the lamp | affix | its beam.

As can be seen, these two lines continue to play fast and loose with iambs. Line 7, for instance, employs two anapests. What both lines have in common, though, is that they suddenly cut short the poem's momentum. Because they are end-stopped and have one less syllable, they have a certain starkness to them, as well as an assertiveness. They pithily argue for the direct confrontation of reality.

Finally, a word must be said about the poem's [refrain](#):

The on- | ly em- | peror | is the em- | peror | of ice-cream.

At six stresses (hexameter), the line is obviously longer than any of the poem's other lines. Three iambs are followed by an anapest, another iamb, and an amphibrach (da-DUM-da).

Alternatively, this line could be read as stressing the word "is":

The on- | ly em- | peror | is the | emper- | or of | ice-cream.

This bumps the line up to seven syllables (heptameter)—creating a pattern in which iambs are replaced halfway through the line with [trochees](#). Such a reading also emphasizes the word "is." Doing so harkens back to the speaker's injunction, "Let **be** be finale of seem." Placing a stress on this present-tense form of the verb "to be" once again captures the speaker's interest in living in the present.

However one interprets this final line, its surprising length and distinctive rhythm add to its cryptic tone, providing a satisfying ending to this striking poem.

## RHYME SCHEME

There is no real [rhyme scheme](#) to speak of in "The Emperor of Ice Cream." The poem *does* have some instances of [rhyme](#), however. These occur in lines 7 and 8, 13 and 14, and 15 and 16. As a result, each stanza ends with a rhyming [couplet](#).

Lines 13 and 14 use their rhyming pair—"come" and "dumb"—to show the silence of the dead woman, her sheer *deadness*. Both words are soft-sounding, evoking the quietness of the room in which her body lays at rest.

Meanwhile, lines 7, 8, 15 and 16 all use the same rhyme, with the /eem/ sound. These rhymes give these particular statements extra weight and authority. This makes sense given that these lines essentially offer the speaker's final thoughts and instructions for each stanza. So lines 7 and 8 comment on the hustle and bustle of the first stanza's kitchen scene, while lines 15 and 16 refer to the dead woman.

There's a logic to these four lines taken in isolation. Let "being," or reality, be the end of "seem," or false appearances. Life and everyday sensation—"the emperor of ice-cream"—is all there is. People should accept this, and acknowledge the reality of death too: "Let the lamp affix its beam." The poem then reiterates its main point in the last line (stated, of course, in the same elusive and mysterious terms). The rhyming words link all of these lines together, creating a logical chain between them. Additionally, by employing rhyme, especially words that rhyme with "ice-cream," the speaker emphasizes the sumptuousness of language, creating a surface that readers can take pleasure in, just as they should take pleasure in their immediate senses.



## SPEAKER

The question of the speaker is one of the most mysterious aspects of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." The poem has a very weird tone, but it's fairly easy to ascertain what is going on (or appears to be going on). The speaker is helping with the preparations of a funeral or wake, and appears to be an authority on what happens. Accordingly, the poem pretty much consists of the speaker barking instructions at those around—with some more abstract instructions too (lines 7 and 15) that don't seem to really refer to any particular people.

The speaker seems to be concerned with both the practical requirements of the occasion *and* the philosophical implications of what's being witnessed. The speaker uses imperative verbs throughout—"Call," "Let," "Bring" and so on—which indicate that the speaker is, for one reason or another, in charge.

There's also something particularly Shakespearean about the speaker's tone. This could almost be a soliloquy from one of

Shakespeare's plays, which are often full of similar uses of imperatives and unusual grammar—grammar that's almost gymnastic in the way that it bends and plays with the sense of the sentences. Of course, the probable [allusion](#) to [Hamlet](#) supports this theory too (see Poetic Devices)!



## SETTING

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" never specifies its setting, but it appears to be some kind of funeral or wake. In particular, the poem looks at the initial preparations for the ceremony—with the speaker barking orders at others in an attempt to get the whole thing organized.

The first scene is full of life and somewhat chaotic. It appears to be in the kitchen, a kind of behind-the-scenes tour of the funeral preparations. Though some critics have suggested that the presence of cigars and ice cream link the poem to Florida or Cuba, it's impossible to say for sure (though [Elizabeth Bishop](#) herself suggested that ice cream was common at funerals in Key West!).

The second scene appears to be in a different room, perhaps the dead woman's bedroom. (It's worth remembering that one of the original meanings of "stanza" is "room.") This stanza is quieter and more contemplative, the hushed silence of the dead woman's room contrasting with the hustle and bustle of the kitchen.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Wallace Stevens is one of the greatest American poets of the 20th century, whom literary critic Harold Bloom called the "best and most representative" American writer of the era. He is generally considered part of the Modernist tradition, though his output is so singular that it doesn't really fit in with other Modernist figures like [Ezra Pound](#) and [T.S. Eliot](#).

Instead, Stevens is often linked with [Romantic](#) writers like [William Wordsworth](#), [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#), and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#). Although Stevens lived almost a century after these writers, he shares many of their concerns, most particularly the belief that each individual's imagination shapes their experience of the world. Like these writers, Stevens was interested in using poetry not only to exercise his imagination, but also to think through his ideas. In this lineage, Stevens also shares affinities with his contemporary [Hart Crane](#), another Modernist poet with Romantic leanings.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream," one of Stevens's most famous and enduring poems, was published in his debut collection *Harmonium* (1923). This collection was not an instant success, but is nowadays considered one of the most important and

widely influential of all English-language poetry books published in the 20th century. Looking at that collection is particularly informative for understanding how such a strangely bizarre and wonderful poem could come to be. The imperative voice (the use of instructional verbs like "call" and "bid" etc.) can be found in numerous poems in the collection. "[A High-Toned Old Christian Woman](#)" is one other example among many.

Elsewhere in the collection there are numerous allusions to Shakespeare (supporting the idea that the poem's titular line alludes to [Hamlet](#)), and mentions of embroidery and dresses. In its subtle contemplation of the meaning of life and death, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" also compares well with the perhaps equally famous "[The Snowman](#)."

Many readers are understandably perplexed by this poem, so it's important to also know a little bit about Stevens's general philosophy about poetry. For Stevens, especially at this phase of his writing life, poetry wasn't really something that people had to "get" or "make sense of"—the *experience* of reading the poem mattered as much as the meaning of the poem. It's worth checking out Stevens's *ars poetica* (poem about the art of poetry), "[Of Modern Poetry](#)," for more of his philosophy.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One of the notable things about "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is that it doesn't really have much of an historical context. The poem was published in Stevens's 1923 collection, *Harmonium*, so in terms of major world events it falls between the two World Wars. But part of the power of Stevens's poetry is that it doesn't really seem all that concerned with the context in which it was written—it prefers to construct a world of its own.

Stevens famously worked as insurance executive for most of his life, writing poetry by night. He lived a quiet suburban life in Connecticut, apart from frequent trips to Florida, a state he greatly loved. The contemplative reveries of Stevens's poetry, and the way his poems seem to have their own world, has often been linked to the fact that he was able to live a life of quiet prosperity, away from many of the tumultuous events of his time.

There are numerous theories about this particular poem's context. Some people believe that the poem is based on Stevens's experiences in Florida, where he often travelled for business. His fellow poet [Elizabeth Bishop](#) asserted that ice cream was a regular part of funerals in Key West, Florida, but this is hard to verify. The presence of cigars in the poem also suggests a link with Cuba.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [More Stevens Poems and Information](#) — A bountiful

resource from the Poetry Foundation, including podcasts, essays, and more poems all relating to Stevens.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wallace-stevens>

- [Bloom on Stevens](#) — Audio of a fascinating lecture on Stevens by Harold Bloom, one of the most influential literary critics of the 20th century. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUJXWgOOZOM>
- [A Reading](#) — The poem read by YouTube Tom O'Bedlam. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrsspndTRXo>
- [The Thrilling Mind of Wallace Stevens](#) — An interesting article about Stevens's life and work. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/02/the-thrilling-mind-of-wallace-stevens>

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALLACE STEVENS

## POEMS

- [Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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