

# An Americana: The Imagery of Rivers in Stevens's Poetry

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## I.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how Stevens uses the imagery of rivers in his poetry and to see what role the imagery of rivers plays in his poetry. Stevens has published seven collections of poems, ranging from *Harmonium* (1923) to *The Rock* (1974), and they contain a number of references to rivers, except for *The Man and the Blue Guitar* (1937). Though the word “river” is a word frequently used in natural scenic descriptions in American literary works, it often assumes, as this essay purports to exhibit, some particular meanings in Stevens's poetry.

Traditionally, the river imagery has occupied a unique place in American prose and poetry, as one may easily recall some works: for example, Walt Whitman's “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1881), Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), T. S. Eliot's “The Fire Sermon” in *The Waste Land* (1922), Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1923), and William C. Williams's *Paterson* (1958). In these works, the river imagery plays important roles, revealing a lot of American scenes and symbols. Here, some questions arise. Is there any difference between Stevens's use of the river imagery and those of other poets? Is Stevens's use of the river imagery based on the American scenes of ordinary life and society? Actually, the river imagery has special meanings for Stevens, and they signify the deep symbols of his poetic world. This essay will show that the imagery of rivers plays a central role in forming Stevens's poetic world. As a conclusion, Stevens may be called a sort of nature poet embodying the American scene and sublime.

In Stevens's whole poems, the word “river” appears twenty-five times, and its plural form “rivers” eight times. These numbers are not necessarily many, compared with the words like “life” or “imagination,” but they form the important part of his poetry. Actually, Stevens's river

imagery is formed with intricate rhetorical devices, which this essay will purport to show. For the sake of investigation, his references to the river will be divided into several types. These types are natural description, simile, personification, and metaphor. All of Stevens's river imagery falls into these groups, and they will reveal unique characteristics of Stevens's poetry.

## II.

First, the natural description of river appears in Stevens's poems as landscapes. In "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" in *Ideas of Order* (1936), a river is described as a unique landscape:

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A bridge above the bright and blue of water  
And the same bridge when the river is frozen.  
Rich Tweedle-dum, poor Tweedle-dee. (124)

The bridge is the center of the scene, and the two elements of water and ice are described as if they would imply a relative phenomenon. The river is shown as a natural scene, but as the last line indicates, the river represents the reciprocal elements, implying the opposite states of richness and poverty.

Likewise, in "Dry Loaf" in *Parts of a World* (1942), a river appears as the prop of the scene, yet it is also symbolical:

It is equal to living in a tragic land  
To live in a tragic time.  
Regard now the sloping, mountainous rocks  
And the river that batters its way over stones,  
Regard the hovels of those that live in this land.

That was what I painted behind the loaf,  
The rocks not even touched by snow,  
The pines along the river and the dry men blown  
Brown as the bread, thinking of birds

Flying from burning countries and brown sand shores, (183)

“Dry Loaf” is a war poem, and as the first and second lines show, the time is recognized as a tragedy. The picture in the poem described by the speaker depicts the scene of a natural landscape, and the river appears as a gushing flow of water spotted along with some pine trees on its banks. What is striking is the description of “dry men.” What does the image of them suggest when they are “Brown as the bread, thinking of birds / Flying from burning countries and brown sand shores”? They indeed appear as if they fled from battle fields. Or does it have some allusion to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which depicts men flown like dead leaves? Anyway, the scene of a natural landscape with a river enhances a sort of calm comfort.

Another poem which shows the natural description of river is “Of Hartford in a Purple Light” in *Parts of a World*. In this poem, Hartford is clad with a purple light of the sun and presented with fresh visions:

Souvenirs of museums. But, Master, there are  
Lights masculine and lights feminine.  
What is this purple, this parasol,

This stage-light of the Opera?  
It is like a region full of intonings.  
It is Hartford seen in a purple light.

.....

But now as in an amour of women  
Purple sets purple round. Look, Master,  
See the river, the railroad, the cathedral . . .

When male light fell on the naked back  
Of the town, the river, the railroad were clear.  
Now, every muscle slops away.

Hi! Whisk it, poodle, flick the spray  
Of the ocean, every-freshening,  
On the irised hunks, the stone bouquet. (208)

The lights are assorted into two types, feminine and masculine, which most likely imply weak and strong. The scenes of a town along the river are transformed by the lights into completely different figures. The river is nothing but the flowing mirror to reflect the sun's light. Altogether, the poem is brimful with the freshened beautiful images of the landscape, small or large items being beautified and intensified. Like Wordsworth's poem describing the Westminster Bridge in morning light, Hartford is transformed into the town of beautiful images.

The last poem to be examined as to the natural description of a river is "Primordia." The water of the river is overflowing in this poem, apparently suggesting the liveliness of life. "Primordia" consists of nine parts, but two of them were, actually, published separately years before: part 7 with the title "In the Carolinas" and part 9 as "Indian River," both issued in *Harmonium* (1923). With nine parts, "Primordia" depicts the throbbing pulse and motion of birth and life, surfaced in various parts of American scenes. In details, parts 1 and 2 deal with some scenes in the Northwest, and part 3 the morning scene of the Mississippi river. The river flows in the snow-melting atmosphere:

The blunt ice flows down the Mississippi,  
At night.  
In the morning, the clear river  
Is full of reflections,  
Beautiful alliterations of shadows and of things shadowed. (25)

The river is brimful with the shattered mirrors of ice mingled with multiple patterns of light and shadow, and it is beautiful. The river reveals the real beauty of nature.

Part 9 of "Primordia" again focuses on the scene of Indian River. Indian River is a 121-mile (195 km) long brackish lagoon in Florida, and it is part of the Indian River Lagoon system. Part 9 strongly reflects the scene Stevens saw during his stay in Florida:

The trade-wind jingles the rings in the nets around the racks by the docks on Indian River.  
It is the same jingle of the water among the roots under the banks of the palmettoes,  
It is the same jingle of the red-bird breasting the orange-trees out of the cedars.  
Yet there is no spring in Florida, neither in boskage perdu, nor on the nunnery beaches.  
(27-28)

The rings of nets, water, and red-birds are envisioned as creating identical sounds, and they are integrated into a harmonious unity. The scene of Indian River is full of the beauties of nature, combined with the original colors of palmettoes, orange trees, and cedars. In Florida, however, there is no spring, and Stevens is intrigued by the world of primary colors.

### III.

The second analysis of Stevens's rhetorical use of river is personification. Stevens frequently uses this rhetorical device to represent the animistic force of nature, and the river is shown to have the strength and changing power of nature. In the section III titled "Approaching Carolina" of "The Comedian As the Letter C" in *Harmonium*, the growth of Crispin, a poetic hero, is described along with the movement of the river. Riding on a vessel into the river, Crispin perceives the emanations of naked reality:

A river bore  
The vessel inward. . . .  
. . . . . all the arrant stinks  
That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.  
He savored rankness like a sensualist. (29)

On the vessel, overwhelmed by the stinks and scenes of the river, Crispin is urged to go through the transformation of his own self:

He marked the marshy ground around the dock,  
The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,  
Curriculum for the marvelous sophomore.  
It purified. It made him see how much  
Of what he saw he never saw at all.  
He gripped more closely the essential prose  
As being, in a world so falsified,  
The one integrity for him, the one  
Discovery still possible to make,  
To which all poems were incident, unless  
That prose should wear a poem's guise at last. (29)

The superficial surface of the appearances of the world is uncovered by the harsh facts of the river, which is almost active in inviting the hero to face the naked reality of the world. The rottenness of the world that he has not noticed before surges toward him and urges him to see things afresh, and the poet says, "It purified." Crispin recognizes the "essential prose," which may lead to perceiving poetic moments.

Since the river has the force itself, it is often compared to the energy of nature. In "Mud Master" in *Ideas of Oder*, the river is described as having the power of blooming life:

The muddy rivers of spring  
Are snarling  
Under muddy skies.  
The mind is muddy.

As yet, for the mind, new banks  
Of bulging green  
Are not;  
Sky-sides of gold  
Are not.  
The mind snarls

Blackest of pickanines,  
There is a master of mud.  
The shaft of light  
Falling, far off, from sky to land,  
That is he—

The peach-bud maker,  
The mud master,  
The master of the mind. (119)

In the first stanza, the muddy rivers snarl like animals, suggesting a primitive force, and the skies as well as the mind are also regarded muddy, a scene which implies the inchoate and fluid state of the world. The interesting point in the second stanza is that the mind is not seeking for the "bulging green" of spring, nor "Sky-sides of gold." What the mind seeks for is, as the third

stanza indicates, "a master of mud." Who is this "master of mud"? He is the blackest of blacks and is a "peach-bud maker." Actually, the mud master is the personification of the life force of nature, and it is an active force, not simply seeking for the beauties of the world but manifesting itself as the creator of the world. He is the personification of the changer of the world and is active like the snarling rivers.

The "shaft of light" in the third stanza is likewise active, and it is designed to reform the land. It is a changing power, and its power is collated with the power of the mud master. As to the beam of light, one may recall Emily Dickinson's famous poem, "There's a certain Slant of light" (F 320). In the poem the light appears as a changing force, and it is interesting to see that also in "Mud Master" Stevens pays attention to the same force of light.

The last poem to be examined in connection with the personification of river is "The Dove in the Belly" in *Transport to Summer* (1947). In the poem rivers are described as holding up mirrors:

The whole of appearance is a toy. For this,  
The dove in the belly builds his nest and coos,

Selah, tempestuous bird. How is it that  
The rivers shine and hold their mirrors up,

Like excellence collecting excellence? (318)

For Stevens the bright reflections of the rivers look as if they were collecting excellence. And for him, such attempts of aesthetic search seem to be the superficial appearances of this world. The world looks as if it would assert its aesthetic movements, and Stevens furthermore writes:

How is it that the wooden trees stand up

And live and heap their panniers of green  
And hold them round the sultry day? Why should

These mountains being high be, also, bright,  
Fetched up with snow that never falls to earth?

And this great esplanade of corn, miles wide,

Is something wished for made effectual

And something more. (318)

The trees look as if they would assert the beauty of green, and the snow-covered mountain seems to keep its beauty in solitude, and the wide belt of corn fields is “something wished for.” In these natural things, Stevens feels that beauty is emphatically alive and clearly spotted. Therefore, Stevens asserts:

And the people in costumes,  
Though poor, though raggeder than ruin, have that

Within them right for terraces—oh, brave salut!  
Deep dove, placate you in your hiddenness. (318)

When natural things decorate themselves with natural beauties, Stevens feels that even human beings are endowed with the aesthetic mind perceiving the beauties. The aesthetic mind is permanent, and it is symbolized as the “dove in the belly.”

#### IV.

In Stevens's poetry, simile is not often used to express the state of a river, but when it appears, it plays an effective role. In the poem “Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snake Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs,” the rivers appear like animals, and a simile is effectively used:

It is true that the rivers went nosing like swine,  
Tugging at banks, until they seemed  
Bland belly-sounds in somnolent troughs,

That the air was heavy with the breath of these swine,  
The breath of turgid summer, and  
Heavy with thunder's rattapallax,

That the man who erected this cabin, planted



This field, and tended it awhile,  
Knew not the quirks of imagery,

That the hours of his indolent, arid days,  
Grotesque with this nosing in banks,  
This somnolence and rattapallax,

Seemed to suckle themselves on his arid being,  
As the swine-like rivers suckled themselves  
While they went seaward to the sea-mouths. (62)

The rivers flow like swines; and, in this poem, it matches with the coarse image of the primitive energy of nature. The rivers tug at the banks as if a swine aggressively feeds on various foods, and the sounds of snorting and thunder are wildly matched. The speaker urges one to pay attention to the “quirks of imagery,” which are the grotesque fusion of the rivers, swine, summer, and cabin. There is a staccato-like rhythm of “somnolence and rattapallax,” which affects the man who built a cabin, and the beating of the rhythm sounds as if it would be fused into the universal rhythm of the sea. In all, the simile of river-swine is successfully used in this poem.

## V.

In Stevens's poetry, a river is often not only an actual river but also metaphorically used to express something beyond the river itself. For example, in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” the river is symbolically used in its twelfth part:

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying. (76)

The river appears suddenly in this part, and it is not necessarily easy to see the meaning of what it signifies. The flying blackbird is already shown in the part X (“At the sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light”), so the sentence of the part XII seems to only reemphasize the flying of the blackbird. The appearance of the river, however, is too blunt to assume any particular meaning. Actually, what does the moving river suggest? The blackbird is described

as existing everywhere and identical with the existence of humans: “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one.” That the blackbird is identical with humans means that the blackbird exists in what the humans perceive. The blackbird is omnipresent, and it exists with the humans. In contrast with the blackbird, the flowing river seems to metaphorically represent the ceaseless flowing of eternity, and along with this eternity the blackbird (as the perception of humans) continues to exist.

In Stevens's poetry, when the river is used for metaphorical purposes, it often represents the flowing of eternity. The metaphorical river is considered to transcend time and space. In “Asides on the Oboe,” such a river appears:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,  
Of final belief. So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

## I

That obsolete fiction of the wide river in  
An empty land; the gods that Boucher killed;  
And the metal heroes that time granulates—  
The philosophers' man alone still walks in dew,  
Still by the sea-side mutters milky lines  
Concerning an immaculate imagery. (226)

What the wide river in an empty land suggests is unknown, yet it is associated with an obsolete fiction. Is it mythological, biblical, or fictional? Actually, there are a lot of associations with the river: it could be the Nile, the Jordan, the Pectolus where the King Midas rinsed himself, or even the Stygian. In any case, the fictional metaphor of the wide river is disenchanted as the gods are killed. Boucher is most likely Francois Boucher (1703-70), a French rococo painter. Concerning Boucher's killing of gods, George Steiner offers an insightful comment: “Rococo painting and the court ballet did worse than kill; they diminished the ancient mysteries and their emblems to ornate trivia. An eighteen-century pastoral in mythological costume is more than a refusal of myth; it is a parody” (163). So the mythological gods are killed, and the enchantment of old myths is disillusioned. Stevens pays attention to the state of the disillusionment of rococo arts, and in “Asides on the Oboe,” he asserts that the “final belief” must be in a fiction, which means that the belief can be remade. As to the recreational movement of modern art, Steiner says:

“. . . the modern artist lives either by the rags and leavings of old, worn-out mythologies, or seeks to create new ones in their stead. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been a classic period for the artist as reviver or maker of myth” (163). In a way, the old gods being killed, a new hero needs to create the myths of new gods. The hero is the “philosophers' man,” who can produce “an immaculate imagery.”

The metaphorical imagery of river plays a central role in some of Stevens's poems, and such an example is “This Solitude of Cataracts” in *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). In this poem, a river appears in contrast with a poetic hero, who is seeking for a static and stable place above inconsistency:

He never felt twice the same about the flecked river,  
Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing

Through many places, as if it stood still in one,  
Fixed like a lake on which the wild ducks fluttered,

Ruffling its common reflections, thought-like Monadnocks,  
There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken.

There was so much that was real that was not real at all.  
He wanted to feel the same way over and over.

He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,  
To keep on flowing. (366)

The river flows, constantly changing its surface figures, and even when it seems to stay in one place like a lake, it is still moving with the ruffling of ducks and reflections. Nothing seems to stay still about the river. Although the river is the metaphorical embodiment of constant transformation, the poetic hero perceives the possibility of discovering a sort of momentary stay against the changes of the flowing. The momentary stay is described as follows:

Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.  
He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks

Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,  
To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,

Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,  
Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury center of time. (366)

What is envisioned is the still and stable moment of the mind attainable beyond the trifle movements of the world; it is a sort of eternal domain, transcending time and space. It is free from destruction, and the speaker turns himself into “a bronze man,” who can have a permanent voice. Thus, the river signifies the oscillations of the surface phenomena of the changing world, against which Stevens provides the poetic possibility of permanent standpoint.

In the poem “The Countryman” in *The Auroras of Autumn*, the river metaphor turns to have a more symbolical meaning. The poem is written in a sort of homage to Swatara, a Pennsylvania creek that joins the Susquehanna. In the poem Stevens admires nature, as he has done in his Florida poems, and Swatara evokes the image of the toughness of nature:

Swatara, Swatara, black river,  
Descending, out of the cap of midnight,  
Toward the cape at which  
You enter the swarthy sea,

Swatara, Swatara, heavy the hills  
Are, hanging above you, as you move,  
Move blackly and without crystal.  
A countryman walks beside you.

He broods of neither cap nor cape,  
But only of your swarthy motion,  
But always of the swarthy water,  
Of which Swatara is the breathing,

The name. He does not speak beside you.  
He is there because he wants to be

And because being there in the heavy hills  
And along the moving of the water—

Being there is being in a place,  
As of a character everywhere,  
The place of a swarthy presence moving,  
Slowly, to the look of a swarthy name. (368-69)

The river is personified and addressed as “you,” showing the speaker's intimate admiration, but it is furthermore used for various metaphors. Swatara descends “out of the cap of the midnight” and moves as if the hills were hanging above” it, and the metaphor of the whole picture creates an image of a mammoth animal moving down into the sea. A countryman walks along with it as if he would absorb the natural strength of the river, and what he absorbs is the “breathing” of Swatrara. It is the rhythm of the life of nature.

Swatara is a special river for Stevens. It also appears in the poem “Metaphor as Degeneration” in *The Auroras of Autumn*, and it furthermore assumes a symbolical meaning. Swatara, though an actual river, is represented as the force of nature for Stevens, and it is symbolically compared to the imaginative river of the universe:

It is certain that the river

Is not Swatara. The swarthy water  
That flows round the earth and through the skies.  
Twisting among the universal spaces,

Is not Swatara. It is being.  
That is the flock-flecked river, the water,  
The blown sheen—or is it air?

How, then, is metaphor degeneration,  
When Swatara becomes this undulant river  
And the river becomes the landless, waterless ocean?

Here the black violets grow down to its banks  
And the memorial mosses hang their green

Upon it, as it flows ahead. (381)

In “The Countryman,” Swatara is described as part of midnight and the force of nature, and in “Metaphor as Degeneration” it is far more imaginatively envisioned. It is imagined to run through the universe, existing as a “being.” In Stevens’s vision, the universal river seems to be degenerated as a metaphor, yet it has gained sublime possibilities. The universal river and Swatara are finally combined as a symbolical reality, running through the earth and the universe. Swatara indeed embodies the connotation of a universal river, and it almost assumes the appearance of an imaginative river like the Styx with the “black violets” and “memorial mosses.” Swatara is loaded with imaginative and symbolical tropes.

Stevens’s metaphorical use of river reaches an ultimate stage in his last collection of poems, *The Rock* (1954). The river reveals more symbolical representations and assumes more profound meanings. The poem, “An Old Man Asleep,” for example, presents a river, which is symbolical of the motion of the universe:

A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity.

The self and the earth—your thoughts, your feelings,  
Your beliefs and disbeliefs, your whole peculiar plot;

The redness of your reddish chestnut trees,  
The river motion, the drowsy motion of the river R. (427)

In the old man’s mind, the two worlds, the self and the earth, exist together, and they form the “whole peculiar lot” of him. The two worlds echo with each other, and their relationship is of the relativity between the subjective and the objective. The redness of chestnut trees may imply the metaphorical color of the old man’s character, growing red as the trees ought to be; and the drowsy motion of the river, associated with the sound of “R,” flows without any relationship with the will of the man. The chestnut trees and the river are unassociated in the first place, but they may be connected in the consciousness of man.

The poem which likewise reveals the profound metaphorical use of river is “The River of Rivers in Connecticut” in *The Rock*. The poem is a sort of summary for Stevens, concerning the metaphorical expression of rivers. Actually, the poem is built with a number of multilayered images, ranging from actual to mythological references. One may say that the poem reveals the ultimate stage of Stevens’s poetic vision:

There is a great river this side of Stygia,  
Before one comes to the first black cataracts  
And trees that lack the intelligence of tree.

In that river, far this side of Stygia,  
The mere flowing of the water is a gayety,  
Flashing and flashing in the sun. On its banks,

No shadow walks. The river is fateful,  
Like the last one. But there is no ferryman.  
He could not bend against its propelling force.

It is not to be seen beneath the appearances  
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington  
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.

It is the third commonness with light and air,  
A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction . . .  
Call it, once more, a river, an unnamed flowing,

Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore  
Of each of the senses: call it, again and again,  
The river that flows nowhere, like a sea. (451)

Stygia is, in a symbolical sense, the River Styx, and the “intelligence of trees” reminds one of the Knowledge of Tree grown in Eden. Described with a mythological and biblical touch, the river of the world of death is overlaid with the image of “a great river,” an actual one in our world. The actual river, which runs near the towns of Farmington and Haddam, refers to the Connecticut river, and Stevens depicts it as being “fateful” and having “its propelling force.” The river looks as if it had its own life and appears to symbolize the universal flowing of life on the earth. The river signifies the continuity of the historical accumulations of human life, absorbing the whole activities of “A curriculum, a vigor, a local abstraction.” Ultimately, the river is sublimed into a mythical river for Stevens, and the ‘river of rivers in Connecticut’ begins to assume the symbolical aura embodying the flowing of universal life. The metaphor of

the river for Stevens indeed expresses the sublimated form of everlasting universal life.

## V.

To conclude, this essay has attempted to examine the imagery of Stevens's river in his poems, and it can be said that his imagery of river is, to a large extent, rhetorical studded with multiple meanings. This essay has divided the rhetorical use of river into four types—natural description, personification, simile, and metaphor. What has been discovered is that, first, the river appears as a natural river, which assumes part of American life, and it is often used to offer fresh and vivid imagery in Stevens's poetry; and, second, it presents the personification which is designed to show some sort of animistic life; and, third, the simile of river is effectively used in Stevens's poetry, and like swine it appears as the embodiment of the power of nature; and, fourth, the river is often used imaginatively and symbolically to represent something beyond the superficial reality of the world, generating deeper and wider metaphorical connotations. Metaphorically, the river is often used to embody nature's force and accumulate the long history of human heritage. Ultimately, the river is sublimated into the symbolical and almost mythical form of expressing the flow of universal life.

Thus, Stevens's treatment of the river shows that it has developed its metaphorical and symbolical meanings from his earlier collection of poetry to *The Rock*. Indeed, the expression of the rivers has revealed the multiple phases of the American landscapes and the growth and maturity of Stevens's poetic vision.

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