The Snow Man

POEM TEXT

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

SUMMARY

You'd have to have a wintery mind to look at the frost and the branches of pine-trees all caked in snow; you'd have to spend a lot of time being cold to look at juniper trees with their coats of ice, or the spruce trees glinting in the January sunlight, without perceiving something bleak and depressing in the sound of the wind or of a few falling leaves. That sound is the sound of the countyside, traveling on that same wind, blowing through this same barren environment where a listener, listening in the snow, stops having an identity—and thus doesn't see anything that isn't there, seeing only that nothing is there at all.

THEMES

OBJECTIVE REALITY VS. SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

"The Snow Man" questions whether it's possible to see the world objectively rather than through a lens of subjective emotion. The poem's speaker discusses the difficulty of observing a winter scene without personifying it as miserable and unforgiving. To see the scene as it *is*, and not as it *feels*, a person would have to relinquish their identity, take on an empty "mind of winter," and become a "snow man"—that is, just another part of the landscape. Of course, that's a tall order! People's perceptions, this poem suggests, might always alter (or even co-create) what they encounter. However, the effort to step away from automatic interpretations and judgments can offer a different—and worthwhile—perspective on the world.

Describing a winter scene, the speaker suggests that it's almost impossible to see it without symbolic and emotional associations—for instance, to look at the bleak landscape without hearing "misery" in the "sound of the wind." In other words, people personify nature without even thinking about it, interpreting a wintry environment as harsh because it makes them cold, or as unforgiving because it doesn't show many signs of life. The poem thus suggests that people usually filter the world through their own feelings and have trouble seeing the natural world as something other than human.

To get rid of that lens and see the world as it really is, the poem suggests, people would have to develop a "mind of winter": that is, a mind that's at one with the wintry landscape rather than standing apart observing it. To get to this state would require being "cold a long time," sinking deep into the wintry world *outside* of oneself, almost becoming a "snow man"—just another part of the landscape, not a person *looking* at the landscape. To have a "mind of winter" also suggests a kind of zen-like emptiness; a true "snow man" would shed his judgments (e.g., *this is bleak*) just as a tree in winter might shed its leaves.

To see the world objectively, however, is also to see that it's "nothing" without human interpretation. Even the idea of "winter" depends on human perception and language. People's interpretations of the world thus both obstruct the direct experience of reality *and* create meaning. The speaker makes this point at the end of the poem when they observe that seeing the world as it really is means seeing "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." In other words, if you see "nothing that is not there," you don't project human emotion onto the environment. But you also see "the nothing that is"—that is, you see *nothingness*, discovering that the world doesn't have an inherent meaning *without* human interpretation.

Though subjective perspective is thus hard to escape, the poem implies that people can at least become more conscious of the lenses through which they look at the world. One can *try* to tune in to the world on its own terms and experience the winter (or anything, for that matter) without jumping to conclusions about what it all means. That is, an observer might make an effort *not* to project human emotions onto the world, even if, ultimately, this might be a nigh-impossible task. Making that

effort, the poem suggests, can offer a fresh and strange perspective.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

"The Snow Man" considers what it would be like to look at the world objectively—and in particular, to observe a winter scene without personifying it as bleak or miserable. In other words, the poem wonders if it's possible to separate objective reality from subjective experience, to tune into the world *as it is* rather than imposing emotions or symbolism onto what one sees.

The speaker who will explore this idea cuts an appropriately distant and objective figure. Rather than describing their own experience, they start the poem standing at a remove from what they see, simply observing that:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

The impersonal pronoun "one" suggests that the speaker is dealing with matters that, in their opinion, are relevant to everybody. So does the poem's title. The word "snowman"—meaning the familiar carrot-nosed snow sculpture—typically *doesn't* use a space between "snow" and "man." From the beginning, then, the poem hints that it's not about Frosty, but about "man" in a wider sense—that is, human beings and the human condition.

Anyone, this speaker says, would need a "mind of winter" in order to see the icy trees clearly. This rich, mysterious idea might suggest more than one thing:

- A "mind of winter" could be a mind so in tune with this particular season that it's at one with the environment. Such a mind, presumably, wouldn't interpret winter as harsh or unforgiving, but just as itself, winter being winter.
- A "mind of winter" could also be a Zen-like state of non-judgment. This mind, like the landscape the speaker describes, might be a bare, sparse environment, in which thoughts like *winter symbolizes death* aren't even present. If perceiving with the human mind is like looking at something through a lens, this "mind of winter" attempts to remove the lens.

In this first stanza, the hypothetical "mind of winter" observes pine trees covered with frost and snow. That's all it does—"regard" them, rather than associate them with human emotions or ideas. Looking at the world so carefully and unjudgmentally, this poem will suggest, might be a near-impossible feat.

The speaker will develop their ideas about perception and reality over the course of a single long sentence, carefully shaped into five tercets (or three-line stanzas) of unmetered, unrhymed free verse. In this neat, compact shape, the speaker's voice feel careful, measured, and still as the snowy scene.

LINES 4-7

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun;

The second tercet develops the first, extending the poem's long single sentence and painting a picture of the real-life winter scene the speaker observes. "One" and "must" from line 1 still act as the main subject and verb here: "[One must] have been cold a long time..."

Being "cold a long time," the speaker suggests, would help the person trying to develop a "mind of winter" to "behold the junipers shagged with ice" without *interpreting* them. Again, there's a sense that a person needs to somehow sink into the winter in order to see it without a lens of emotion or symbolism. Ironically enough, the "cold[ness]" here might itself be symbolic, suggesting an unemotive and nonjudgmental perspective.

Notice how vivid and specific the imagery gets here. The speaker doesn't simply describe trees, but "junipers" and "spruces," "shagged with ice" or engulfed in the "distant glitter" of sunlight on snow. This specificity, too, might be part of the speaker's quest to see clearly.

Take a closer look at those "junipers shagged with ice." "Shagged" suggests that ice has made the trees look *shaggy*, a word that usually describes a thick, unruly coat of hair (like a dog's). In a way, then, the junipers look *warm* with ice—a paradox. This is a quiet challenge to the reader, a way of asking them to look again at the winter landscape and set aside their typical associations.

Then there are:

> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
> Of the January sun; [...]

The delicate /t/ consonance of "distant glitter" sparkles on the

page and chimes in the ear, capturing the austere beauty of this frozen environment. The enjambment between the two stanzas makes that "glitter" seem all the more "distant": the reader's eyes need to travel a ways down the page to find the end of the phrase.

LINES 7-12

and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,
Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

The "snow man" who could observe this wintry scene objectively, the speaker goes on, would hear the same "sound of the wind" as anyone else. But he would not hear "any misery" in it—though most people, the speaker implies, would. In other words, most people reflexively personify a winter landscape as harsh and unforgiving, reading human emotion into a world that possesses none of its own.

Remove this emotional lens, the speaker suggests, and the wind is no more miserable than the warm rays of the sun. The sound of the wind is just "the sound of the land," without any emotion or significance of its own. Human perspective, in other words, *creates* meaning and *imposes* it on the outside world.

Once again, though, removing a lens of emotion or symbolism to see objective reality beneath is much more easily said than done! Even the language of these stanzas presents a challenge to readers, practically daring them *not* to hear lonely "misery" in the wind the speaker describes.

The speaker describes the landscape as a "bare place" and sets aside the detailed visual imagery of the first two stanzas. Repetition stresses that there's very little happening in this wintry environment:

> [...] misery **in the sound of the wind**,
> **In the sound of** a few leaves,
> Which is **the sound of** the land
> Full of **the same wind**
> That is blowing in **the same** bare place

The parallelism on "the sound of" and the diacope on "wind" and "same" stress the windswept, monotonous "bare[ness]" of this place.

But this bareness also ties in with the concept of the "mind of winter." It's as if the landscape itself has achieved a state of non-thought and non-judgment, shedding subjective interpretation as a tree might shed dead leaves. Ironically enough, the empty landscape might symbolize the empty mind that could see its surroundings without symbolism!

LINES 13-15

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

In the final stanza, the poem introduces the figure of "the listener." This is the "snow man" of the title, the imagined objective observer with a "mind of winter."

This figure "listens in the snow" to the "sound of the wind." But instead of hearing "misery" there, he "beholds" only "nothing." In other words, he absorbs the world without associations or judgments, totally attuned to what's outside him. Intense diacope on the word "nothing"—a word the poem uses to describe both him and the landscape—shows there is no distinction between the "snow man" and his environment:

> And, **nothing** himself, beholds
> **Nothing** that is not there and the **nothing** that is.

But the word "nothing" itself means several things here:

- The first "nothing" refers to the snow man himself—a figure who has immersed himself in the winter landscape so completely that he doesn't have a *self* any more. He's just part of the snowy world—which is what makes him a "snow man."
- The second "nothing" describes what he sees: "nothing that is not there." In other words, the snow man experiences winter simply as winter, not as "harsh" or "miserable." He's stepped outside personification and symbolism into pure presence, one with what he sees, not projecting anything onto the world.
- The third "nothing" describes what's there once one has achieved such objectivity. Look at reality without one's usual lenses, these lines suggest, and one will see that it lacks an *identity*. The world isn't inherently good or bad, it doesn't mean anything on its own; perhaps it doesn't even quite *exist* outside a human perspective. Reality, this "nothing" suggests, might be *created* by our inbuilt ways of sensing and perceiving the world.

There's a whole lot in this poem that questions whether it's possible to achieve the snow man's full objectivity. The fact that the poem uses winter symbolism (a chilly, blank "mind of winter") even as the speaker imagines stepping outside such symbolism, for instance, feels pretty ironic. And the idea that the snow man could "behold" without having a perspective—he has to stand *somewhere*, after all—feels like a brain-twister.

But though human beings might never fully attain the listening snow man's Zen-like state, the poem suggests it might be worthwhile to *try* to hear the wind as the wind, not misery, and

to see winter as winter, not a tyrant or a sufferer. Such an effort, the poem suggests, can offer a difficult but refreshingly strange perspective, if not a full escape from the limits of perspective itself.

SYMBOLS

THE SNOWY TREES

The poem's speaker might reject the idea that anything in this poem is symbolic! The poem wonders if it's possible to look at a winter landscape and *not* ascribe symbolic meaning to it—for instance, by resisting the idea that icy, chilly stillness automatically suggests "misery."

But fittingly (and ironically), the layers of ice in this winter scene might symbolize just such layers of potentially misguided meaning. The trees here are "crusted with snow" or "shagged with ice." Beneath the frosty rime, though, they're all evergreens—that is, they never shed their needles, but stay green and lively all year round. A casual observer might look at the scene and think, *There's no life here.* But their initial impression would be wrong. In other words, an automatic interpretation conceals another truth—just the process the poem describes.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;"
- **Lines 5-7:** "the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun;"

WINTER

In order to perceive this wintry scene and *not* invest it with symbolism or emotion, the speaker declares, "One must have a mind of winter." Ironically enough, though, even the idea of a "mind of winter" draws on winter symbolism to suggest what such a mind might be like: empty, (emotionally) cold, and still. In other words, to see the world objectively, the mind would have to shed its thoughts, feelings, and associations like a tree loses its leaves. The poem thus uses winter symbolism at the exact same moment as it describes trying to escape it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mind of ," "winter"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

"The Snow Man" uses two types of imagery to bring the winter scene to life on the page.

In the first two stanzas, the speaker describes the winter landscape:

> One must have a mind of winter
> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
> The spruces rough in the distant glitter
> Of the January sun; [...]

These lines conjure up a wilderness of frozen evergreens: "crusted" and "shagged," they're dramatically engulfed in ice. The imagery paints a severe-but-beautiful picture that subtly challenges the reader not to automatically personify this scene as miserable. Note, too, how delicate sound work makes the images all the more evocative (e.g. the light /t/ consonance that evokes the "distant glitter" of sunlight on ice).

From line 8, the poem switches to auditory (sound-based) imagery. The speaker describes:

> the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,

Here, the speaker presents the sound of the wind in the plainest possible terms—it's just the "sound of the wind," audible only because of the movement of "a few leaves," creating the only "sound of the land." This shift away from the vivid language of the first two stanzas again challenges the reader, because it's hard to read these stark lines *without* imagining "misery in the sound of the wind."

In different ways, both types of imagery challenge the reader *not* to make judgements about this winter world, instead simply seeing and hearing it alongside the speaker. The true "snow man," the speaker suggests, doesn't think of the scene as beautiful or harsh—or as anything at all.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;"
- **Lines 5-7:** "To behold the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter / Of the January sun;"
- **Lines 8-9:** "the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves,"
- **Line 10:** "Which is the sound of the land"

PERSONIFICATION

"The Snow Man" raises the idea of personification only to try to push it away. The speaker notes that people often reflexively personify the winter wind as miserable. Someone would need a "mind of winter" (that is, an empty mind and/or a mind wholly at one with the landscape) in order:

> [...] not to think
> Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

Readers probably recognize the common symbolism that presents winter as cruel, deathly, and sad. But *outside* of human judgment, this poem insists, winter is none of those things. It's "nothing"—that is, it lacks meaning, emotion, or inherent value—outside of the framework of human perspective. Outside of human perception, the winter is no more miserable than the summer! But personification (here, technically more akin to pathetic fallacy), the speaker suggests, is pretty hard to evade: people automatically read human emotion into the whole world, and they do it all the time, not just in winter.

As with so much else in this poem, there's a certain "don't-think-of-an-elephant" quality to the speaker's resistance to personification. Though the poem raises the idea that there might be a hint of "misery in the sound of the wind" only to try to get rid of it, the mere mention of that "misery" tempts readers to experience the scene the speaker describes as miserable, even if only for a moment.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves,"

REPETITION

The speaker uses repetitions of various flavors to shape the poem's argument and stress its major ideas.

The first two stanzas use anaphora to slowly build up a meditative picture of the landscape and to introduce the philosophical ground the speaker will cover. "One must have a mind of winter," the speaker says:

> To regard the frost and the boughs
> Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
> And have been cold a long time
> To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

This similar sentence structure draws special attention to the idea of *looking*: the way we "regard" and "behold" the world is clearly important here.

In stanzas three to five, the repetitions intensify. Listen to all the echoes here:

> [...] in the sound of the wind,
> In the sound of a few leaves,
> Which is the sound of the land
> Full of the same wind
> That is blowing in the same bare place

These repetitions focus the reader's attention on the sound of the cold wind. But they also create a sense of uniformity. Like the environment itself, these lines are composed of a few bare elements.

The repetitions in the last stanza stress the pure receptivity the speaker imagines a true "snow man" might be able to achieve. The polyptoton of "listener" and "listens" in line 13, for instance, emphasizes that listener's passive, nonjudgmental observation. Listening, the repetition stresses, is all this listener does: no judging, no thinking, just absorbing.

The poem closes with some intense diacope on the word "nothing," which ties the imagined snow man to the "nothing[ness]" of his surroundings. "Listen[ing] in the snow," he loses his identity:

> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Note that each of these "nothing"s means something slightly different:

- The first suggests that the snow man has lost his identity completely, allowing himself to be one with the world around him.
- The second suggests that he's not seeing anything that isn't there—in other words, he's not seeing the world through a lens of emotion or opinion.
- The third, meanwhile, is a kind of positive "nothing," indicating the truth beyond human perceptions: the pure, blank, empty reality of the world when one isn't reading one's own ideas into it.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "To regard the frost"
- **Line 5:** "To behold the junipers"
- **Line 8:** "in the sound of the wind,"
- **Line 9:** "In the sound of a few leaves,"
- **Line 10:** "the sound of the land"
- **Line 11:** "the same wind"
- **Line 12:** "the same bare place"
- **Line 13:** "listener," "listens"
- **Line 14:** "nothing," "beholds"
- **Line 15:** "Nothing," "nothing"

VOCABULARY

Crusted (Line 3) - Covered in a way that gives the appearance of a hard outer layer.

Behold (Line 5, Line 14) - Observe, witness.

Junipers (Line 5) - A type of evergreen (a tree that has leaves all year round).

Shagged (Line 5) - Covered as though with a thick, shaggy coat.

Spruce (Line 6) - A type of evergreen (a tree that has leaves all year round).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Snow Man" is built from five three-line stanzas (also known as tercets)—all of which form just one long, complex sentence, its clauses linked with semicolons. Together with a distant, almost abstract tone, this shape makes the speaker sound as if they're carefully working through a complex philosophical issue (which they are!).

Given that the poem is all one sentence, it's notable that it uses stanza breaks at all. Perhaps that little bit of extra white space in between stanzas evokes the winter landscape: the snow-white page stands in for the bare, stark environment.

METER

"The Snow Man" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use any regular pattern of meter. However, the poem moves along at a pretty steady, even pace. Each neat stanza uses three lines of about the same length, making the speaker's observations feel unhurried and thoughtful and evoking the winter scene's stillness.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "The Snow Man" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. Perhaps rhyme would feel too ordered, too *human*, for a poem that imagines transcending the human perspective. The snow man himself—that is, the "listener" who appears in the final stanza—seems to take winter just as it is, not trying to impose any judgment or interpretation on what he observes; a rhyme scheme might be just such an imposition.

SPEAKER

At first glance, the reader might assume the speaker is the "snow man" of the title—but that "snow man" in fact seems to be the "listener" who appears at the end of the poem. Instead, "The Snow Man" has an anonymous speaker who remains a mystery to the reader. Everything the speaker says forms one long sentence that begins with the impersonal pronoun "One," making the poem feel general and abstract, far from intimate.

Stevens's poems of this period often take a similar approach. But the speaker's authorial distance is especially important here. The poem asks how possible it is to perceive the world without projecting emotion or symbolism onto it (e.g., automatically personifying winter as *harsh* or *unforgiving*). The speaker's remove makes the poem *feel* objective, even if ultimately it does have a perspective. After all, just who exactly witnesses and describes the "listener" as they "behold" this winter scene?

SETTING

"The Snow Man" describes a winter scene. Snow covers the pine trees, the junipers are "shagged with ice," and the spruces glint in the "distant glitter/ Of the January sun." A cold wind blows through the woods.

While the poem brings this scene to life with vivid, precise imagery, it expressly avoids personifying the landscape. It doesn't say, for example, that there is a *harsh* wind blowing across the land. Instead, the poem points out how difficult it is to "behold" this environment without imposing emotions or symbolism onto it. Human perspective, this poem suggests, automatically projects all kinds of thoughts, feelings, and associations on the world—but the poem's speaker is interested in what the world looks like when people try their hardest *not* to do that.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was one of the most important American poets of the 20th century. He is generally considered part of the modernist tradition, though his poetry is so distinctive that it doesn't really fit in with the work of other modernist figures like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Instead, critics often link Stevens with Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, John Keats, 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 many of the Romantics, Stevens was interested in using poetry not just to exercise his imagination, but to work through his ideas. In this, he resembles Hart Crane, another modernist poet with Romantic leanings.

"The Snow Man," one of Stevens's most famous and enduring poems, was published in his debut collection *Harmonium* (1923). While not an instant success, *Harmonium* is now considered one of the most influential collections of 20th-

century poetry. Other poems in the book also explore the role that perspective plays in shaping reality—or at least the *experience* of reality. Check out "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" for another classic example. In his book *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens addressed the importance of the subjective human lens directly, saying: "The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was published in Stevens's 1923 collection *Harmonium*, which appeared between the two world wars. But Stevens's poetry is never that concerned with the context in which it was written; it prefers to construct a world of its own. In a way, "The Snow Man" is an attempt to do away with a human context altogether!

Stevens famously lived a quiet life in suburban Connecticut, where he worked as an insurance executive and wrote poetry by night (or, as the story goes, composed it in his head on his stroll to work). The contemplative reveries of Stevens's poetry have often been linked to the fact that he was able to live a life of quiet prosperity, insulated from many of the tumultuous events of his time.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWZEDZsjEGo)
- Wallace Stevens's Legacy — Read an article celebrating Stevens's life and work. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/02/the-thrilling-mind-of-wallace-stevens)
- More of Stevens's Poetry — Take a look at an electronic edition of Stevens's important 1923 book Harmonium, in which "The Snow Man" was collected. (https://wallacestevens.com/harmonium)
- Bloom on Stevens — Listen to a lecture on Stevens by the influential literary critic Harold Bloom. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUJXWgOOZOM)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALLACE STEVENS POEMS

- Anecdote of the Jar
- Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock
- The Emperor of Ice-Cream
- Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

HOW TO CITE

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