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THE NECESSARY CONTRADICTIONS: IDEOLOGICAL TENSIONS IN WALLACE STEVENS'S "NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION"

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Abstract:

This research paper explores Wallace Stevens's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) as a modernist meditation on the ideological crisis of meaning in the wake of what is perceived as metaphysical collapse. Structured around the tripartite imperatives "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure," the poem appears to be simultaneously constructing and dismantling its poetic framework. The aim of this study is to analyze the internal contradictions in Notes as deliberate poetic strategies that perform philosophical uncertainty alongside certainties. Using a dialectical close reading methodology, the paper draws on Nietzschean perspectivism, Kantian aesthetics, and Derridean différance to argue that these contradictions are central to Stevens's poetic project. Each theoretical lens reveals how the poem enacts a cycle of meaning-making, unmaking, and reimagining. The analysis demonstrates that Stevens's self-sabotaging structure is not a sign of failure but an intentional staging of belief's fragility in a disenchanted world. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Stevens's contradictions do not undermine the "Supreme Fiction"; rather, they define it. The poem's power lies in its ability to articulate a poetic faith sustained not by resolution but by an enduring commitment to imaginative tension.

Keywords: *Stevens, Nietzsche, Perspectivism, Kant, Aesthetics, Derrida, Difference, English Poetry, American Literature, Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*

Introduction:

Wallace Stevens's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) stands as a defining artifact of modernist poetry, not only for its philosophical ambition but for its deliberate staging of poetry as a site of ideological debate. Published during World War II, the poem seeks to establish a new metaphysical foundation rooted in poetic imagination rather than traditional religious belief. Its tripartite structure; "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure", proposes a secular metaphysics, yet each section unravels the very coherence it attempts to construct. Stevens outlines criteria for what he calls the "Supreme Fiction," a conceptual substitute for divinity in art. Yet beneath its seemingly systematic framework, the poem reveals profound contradictions that reflect Stevens's broader poetic and ideological struggles. The tensions between abstraction and sensual immediacy, between change and permanence, and between belief and skepticism destabilize the foundation the poem tries to build. These contradictions are not mere rhetorical inconsistencies but are central to Stevens's modernist vision, where the desire for stable meaning clashes with the recognition of surrounding chaos and uncertainties.

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

This paper examines the internal contradictions in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as a deliberate poetic strategy, one that underscores Stevens's philosophical uncertainties and ideological commitments. This study argues that these contradictions are performative; a poetic enactment of the difficulty of belief in an era of epistemological rupture. By foregrounding Stevens's unresolved tensions, the analysis demonstrates how Notes resists becoming the "Supreme Fiction" it envisions, instead of positioning art as a practice that thrives amid its own failures. Although existing scholarship has explored Stevens's poetics of imagination, secular theology, and aestheticism, no one, to my knowledge, has focused on how the text's self-contradictions function as philosophical performance. Through close reading and critical engagement, this paper contends that the contradictions in Notes are not incidental but fundamental to understanding Stevens's response to modernity's metaphysical void.

Rather than resolving these contradictions, this paper emphasizes their centrality and function. By analyzing key moments of ideological tension within Stevens's aesthetic framework, this study argues that the inconsistencies in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" constitute their own kind of supreme fiction; structures of meaning that simultaneously sustain and dismantle belief. In doing so, the research contributes to broader conversations about poetic epistemology, modernist aesthetics, and the role of contradiction in philosophical literature.

Literature Review:

Critical engagement with "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" has consistently recognized the poem as one of Stevens's most ambitious attempts to articulate a comprehensive poetics. Across the literature, scholars identify the poem as an aesthetic and intellectual enterprise that repositions poetry as a means of understanding reality after the decline of traditional religious and philosophical certainties. Scholars such as Helen Vendler (1984) and Harold Bloom (1976) view it as the culmination of Stevens's lifelong meditations on imagination, reality, and belief. This review synthesizes the scholarly discourse surrounding "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction". Jennifer Johnson (2004) frames "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as a defense of poetry that builds on the rhetorical lineage of Sidney and Shelley while departing from it in fundamental ways. Rather than persuading skeptics of poetry's social utility, Stevens seeks to reaffirm poetry's necessity to itself and its practitioners. Johnson argues that Stevens dramatizes the internal philosophical struggle faced by the poetic imagination, which must defend itself "against itself" in the face of modern disenchantment (Johnson, 2004). Through the use of the prologue and epilogue, Johnson highlights how Stevens frames poetry simultaneously as a source of consolation and critique. It suggests that *Notes* is not a rhetorical artifact but a dynamic inquiry into the sustaining function of poetic imagination. In doing so, Stevens reinforces poetry's relevance as a spiritual and cognitive practice amid an increasingly fragmented modern world.

Building on metaphysical concerns, William Franke (2017) identifies "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as a poetic expression of negative theology, which aligns Stevens with theological traditions that emphasize the ineffable and unknowable dimensions of existence. According to Franke, Stevens's poem does not seek to define the "supreme fiction" but to acknowledge its inaccessibility, thus maintaining its status as

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

the ultimate yet unattainable source of meaning. Stevens's invocation to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye" encapsulates the apophatic imperative to unlearn established knowledge in order to perceive mystery anew (Franke, 2017). Franke situates the poem within a post-mythical context, where traditional deities have become fictions, yet their imaginative utility endures. This paradox enables Stevens to explore the idea that the world is "invented" through linguistic and imaginative constructs. Although these constructs provide orientation, they also underscore human estrangement from ontological certainty. Franke's analysis of Stevens's engagement with Platonic imagery and linguistic invention situates the poet within modern philosophical and theological discourses and reveals a lyrical metaphysics grounded in absence rather than presence.

Similarly, Michael Bryson contributes a mystical and perennialist reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" that emphasizes Stevens's desire to replace religious transcendence with aesthetic imagination. Bryson argues that Stevens's tripartite poetic criteria reflect not only artistic principles but also mystical progression, where the imagination assumes a sacred function (Bryson, 2020). The call to see the sun with an "ignorant eye" resonates with both Platonic idealism and Zen Buddhism. It indicates a spiritual purification of perception. Bryson notes that the dismissal of Phoebus as a name for the unnameable aligns with Meister Eckhart's apophatic theology, where divinity is accessed through the abandonment of conceptual language. By asserting that "God and the imagination are one," Stevens reconfigures poetic creation as a theological act. Bryson connects this impulse to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, which suggests that the "first idea" in Stevens's poem represents a shared, archaic source of meaning. This reading highlights Stevens's capacity to reimagine spiritual experience through poetic innovation. It positions *Notes* as an evolving metaphysical system that offers an aesthetic substitute for doctrinal belief.

Expanding the relevance of Stevens's ideas into other disciplines, Khan, Amir, and Zeeshan (2024) explores the poem's impact on modern drama by applying Stevens's framework to Edward Albee's absurdist plays. Their analysis emphasizes the transformative potential of imagination as a supreme fiction capable of reshaping perceptions of reality. The authors argue that Stevens's poetic principles; particularly abstraction, change, and pleasure, inform Albee's theatrical techniques, especially his use of grotesque imagery and surreal settings to critique societal conventions (Khan et al., 2024). Drawing on Frank Doggett's (1961) work, the authors emphasize how Stevens uses poetic fragments to distill universal truths and to allow fiction to transcend its own artifice. The parallel between Stevens's poetry and Albee's drama exemplifies how the concept of supreme fiction functions across artistic forms to expose and resist the vacuity of modern life. The study thus highlights Stevens's continuing relevance in contemporary cultural critique, as his poetics offer a model for imaginative resistance to material and ideological domination.

Tyson M. Lies (2010) offers a geographically and politically grounded reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" by examining its affinities with Stevens's other work, particularly "The Idea of Order at Key West." Lies argues that Stevens's supreme fiction emerges from a dialectic between imagination and nature, a process materially situated in the poet's experience of Key West. According to Lies, the island's colonial history and

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

natural landscape shaped Stevens's metaphysical concerns, particularly his rejection of imposed political or religious orders (Lies, 2010). The critique of imperialist structures is embodied in images such as the "glassy lights" that "portion out the sea," a metaphor for artificial boundaries that oppose the organic creativity of the imagination. Lies situates this critique within broader debates on U.S. imperialism. He draws on Amy Kaplan's theory of cultural homogenization to interpret Stevens's poetic world-building as a resistance to hegemonic order. Unlike purely symbolic or metaphysical readings, Lies's analysis anchors Stevens's abstract poetics in tangible social and historical contexts and reveals how the supreme fiction offers not only spiritual consolation but also political critique.

Other critics have gestured toward contradiction but often in service of reaffirming Stevens's poetic mastery. Milton J. Bates (1985), in his influential study "Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self", explores the tension between the poet's public and private selves and suggests that Stevens constructs a coherent poetic identity through mythmaking. However, Bates tends to resolve rather than emphasize contradiction and portrays Stevens's myths as successful mediators between self and world. This interpretation overlooks how Stevens's poetic mythologies often reveal their own artificiality and, in doing so, destabilize the very coherence they aim to achieve.

Thus, the existing literature provides valuable insight into Stevens's poetics, but it often stops short of fully examining how "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" undermines itself from within. By focusing on the poem's internal contradictions, not as failures, but as deliberate structural features, this research offers a new reading that situates Stevens's work within the broader context of modernist disillusionment and philosophical skepticism. The analysis will demonstrate that these contradictions are essential to understanding Stevens's vision of poetry as a space where the search for meaning must always coexist with its impossibility.

Methodology:

This study employs a dialectical close reading of Wallace Stevens's "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942). It does not consider the poem's contradictions as flaws but understands them as productive tensions that reveal its ideological foundation. Close reading is applied to key passages from each of the poem's three sections to trace how Stevens constructs and simultaneously destabilizes his poetic imperatives. The dialectical element emerges by examining how each assertion in the poem is countered or qualified by its own language, producing a cycle of affirmation and negation. This textual analysis is informed by three interrelated theoretical frameworks:

1. **Nietzschean perspectivism** allows for an exploration of how the idea of the "Supreme Fiction" moves between acts of creation and acts of negation. The phrase "Phoebus is dead" demonstrates this movement by simultaneously rejecting inherited ideals and invoking the necessity of new ones.
2. **Kantian sublime** offers a means to interpret passages such as "It Must Change," where the imagery, especially the phrase "the first idea," strives toward transcendence but ultimately acknowledges its limitations.
3. **Derridean différance** provides a way to trace the continual deferral of meaning throughout the poem.

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JALT

This approach avoids the imposition of theory onto the text and instead identifies conceptual tensions already embedded within the poem.

Theoretical Framework:

Together, these paradigms; Nietzschean existentialism, Kantian aesthetics, and Derridean linguistics, form a theoretical scaffold for analyzing "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction". The Supreme Fiction becomes more than a poetic ideal. It functions as a philosophical experiment that must fail in order to succeed. The poem thereby mirrors modernist subjectivity: a domain where the longing for meaning confronts its inherent impossibility, and where contradiction becomes the deepest mode of coherence. Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "death of God" is particularly instructive. With the collapse of traditional metaphysical frameworks, Nietzsche proposes that humans must construct new systems of value. Stevens's "Supreme Fiction" can be read as a response to this imperative: it substitutes theological absolutes with imaginative constructs. Yet, consistent with Nietzschean thought, any such invention must remain provisional, fragile, and transparently artificial. Stevens recognizes this in the poem's very architecture, as each section undermines the assurances proffered by the others. The demand that the Supreme Fiction "must change," for example, destabilizes the notion of anything "supreme," which typically implies constancy and authority.

Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime also shapes a reading of Stevens's contradictory poetics. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant (1790) locates the sublime at the juncture where imagination fails and reason intervenes to assert conceptual control. In Stevens's poem, the imagination endeavors to construct a new metaphysical order, yet it is persistently challenged by the critical faculties of reason and the limitations of language. Rather than rejecting the sublime, Stevens stages its failure and reconfigures it through poetic form. This shift marks a modernist movement from transcendence to immanence, where the sublime points not to the divine but to the instability of human perception and belief.

From a post-structuralist perspective, especially through the lens of Jacques Derrida, Stevens's contradictions reflect the logic of *différance*, in which meaning is endlessly deferred and never fully present. The poem yearns for a structure of belief, a fiction that can be "supreme," yet consistently sabotages its own assertions. Each claim evokes its negation, generating a dialectical rhythm that destabilizes interpretive closure. For Derrida, such instability is not a flaw but the very condition of signification. Thus, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" can be understood as a deconstructive performance that dramatizes the impossibility of securing metaphysical certainty through poetic language.

This analysis unfolds through three intersecting frameworks that illuminate how Stevens enacts modernist contradiction not as an external imposition, but as a structural and thematic principle embedded within the poem itself.

1. Nietzschean Will-to-Power as Poetic Principle

Stevens's imperative tone, "It must", echoes Nietzsche's (1910) vision of artistic creation as a form of willful assertion in a disenchanted world. The line "Phoebus is dead, ephebe" (Stevens, 1954) enacts Nietzsche's "death of God" while simultaneously attempting to fill the metaphysical void with poetic invention. This oscillation between

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

negation and creation mirrors Nietzsche's dialectic of destruction and revaluation in *The Will to Power* (1910). Stevens's contradictions, then, are generative: like Nietzsche's Übermensch, the poem asserts meaning through an awareness of its own artifice.

2. Kantian Sublime as Structural Paradox

Kant's (1790) *Critique of Judgment* provides a model for understanding the poem's ambivalence toward transcendence. The section "It Must Be Abstract" embodies this tension. The command to "perceive the idea" (Stevens, 1954) evokes Kant's mathematical sublime, in which reason strives to conceptualize what eludes imagination. Yet Stevens subverts the Kantian framework by rendering the "idea" as invented and provisional. In Stevens's poetics, the sublime becomes a scene not of universal reason but of imaginative invention, where the most elevated moments simultaneously dismantle their own claims to transcendence.

3. Derridean *Différance* as Poetic Practice

From a post-structuralist perspective, especially through the lens of Jacques Derrida, Stevens's contradictions reflect the logic of différance. In this framework, meaning is endlessly deferred and never fully present. Derrida's (1978) theory challenges the notion of stable signification. He proposes instead that language generates meaning through a play of differences, where each sign refers not to a fixed truth but to other signs. This framework is especially relevant to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction". In that poem, every conceptual anchor, whether it is "Phoebus," the "first idea," or the "major man," is destabilized or ironized. Derrida is important to Stevens because both engage with the fragility of metaphysical certainty in a post-theological world. The poem's linguistic and philosophical structure reflects différance because it resists settling on final meanings. Each assertion in the poem is followed by its reversal. The poem must be abstract. It still remains embodied. It must change. It continues to reuse familiar imagery. It must give pleasure. It ends with deferral. Différance reshapes our understanding of Stevens by showing that these contradictions are not just rhetorical or stylistic. They are the very mechanics of meaning. From a Derridean perspective, The Supreme Fiction, then, is not an ideal to attain but a trace. It becomes a placeholder for something that always escapes. Seen this way, Derrida clarifies how Stevens's poetics of failure becomes a philosophical performance. In that performance, instability is the basis for comprehension.

Analysis

The Paradox of Abstraction:

The first section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction", titled "It Must Be Abstract," opens Stevens's poetic treatise by establishing a paradox that recurs throughout the poem. Although the imperative implies a rejection of the concrete in favor of the conceptual, Stevens subverts this binary from the outset. His abstraction does not resemble the philosophical aloofness of metaphysics. Instead, it remains bound to the world of perception and sensation. Stevens does not advocate for a poetry devoid of sensuality or emotional resonance. He calls for a Supreme Fiction that aims for transcendence while admitting its dependence on sensory and linguistic mediation. This contradiction is woven into the very language of the poem, which attempts to build a system of belief grounded in imaginative elevation while remaining acutely aware of its

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

own limitations. The directive "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun" (Stevens, 1954) foregrounds this dual nature. The poet calls upon the ephebe, a youthful disciple and inheritor of poetic tradition, to engage with an abstract concept that is immediately named as fiction. The ephebe is asked to perceive an "idea," yet it is housed within an "invented world," a space both constructed and intangible. In demanding the pursuit of an abstract ideal through perceptual engagement, Stevens draws attention to poetry's inherent conflict: it must reach for the immaterial while remaining ensnared in material expression.

This friction becomes more pointed with Stevens's introduction of the figure of Phoebus. In classical mythology, Phoebus, Apollo represents clarity, beauty, and divine knowledge. By invoking him, Stevens acknowledges the poetic inheritance of ideal forms. Yet he swiftly unravels this ideal by stating,

"Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named."
(Stevens, 1954 p. 381)

In this single declaration, Stevens both negates and preserves the symbol. "Phoebus is dead", which announces a break from traditional sources of poetic authority. However, he is also framed as a cipher for an unnamable essence, an abstract entity that resists linguistic encapsulation. Stevens undercuts his own symbol even as he uses it, implying that the Supreme Fiction must create new forms that carry the weight of the old while rejecting their stability. The name "Phoebus" becomes a vessel emptied of fixed meaning, simultaneously a gesture toward transcendence and a critique of the poetic impulse to capture it. The contradiction does not weaken Stevens's vision; it gives it substance. In dismantling classical symbolism while retaining its aura, Stevens illustrates the poetic necessity of working within collapsed forms to access truths that remain unresolved.

Stevens reinforces this contradiction in his address to the ephebe, whose role as a novice poet or philosophical apprentice reflects the challenge of inheriting and revising poetic traditions. The ephebe is tasked with perceiving an idea that remains inherently elusive, embedded in an imagined construct. The dual nature of Stevens's diction supports this tension. Words such as "idea," "invention," and "first idea" appear alongside physical and sensory verbs like "perceive," "begin," and "see." This pairing highlights the impossibility of pure abstraction within poetry, a form that must constantly mediate meaning through embodied experience. Stevens mirrors what Kant described as the "schematism of understanding", wherein abstract concepts require the application of sensory images for cognition to occur (Kant, 1790). But Stevens does not merely illustrate this philosophical idea; he dramatizes its failure. The "first idea," which presumably anchors the "Supreme Fiction", is never presented directly. It remains "not our own," an unreachable origin that must be approached through layers of poetic invention. This recognition destabilizes the very framework of poetic authority and suggests that poetry must invent its truths while acknowledging their artificiality. The poetic world Stevens constructs is one of suspended resolution, where the relationship between idea and image is always contingent and provisional.

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

Even when Stevens engages with overtly abstract concepts, his language remains grounded in sensory and emotional registers. The line "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea" (p. 382) links metaphysical renewal to a bodily and collective experience. The idea of "refreshing life" evokes not only conceptual revitalization but also an almost tactile sense of recovery and movement. The persistence of these embodied figures across the poem's different ideological phases demonstrates that Stevens cannot fully separate abstraction from sensuality. The poem's effort to articulate a "Supreme Fiction" collapses under the weight of its own embodiment. Stevens does not see this as a failure. Instead, he presents it as the essential condition of poetic thought. Abstraction, in his view, cannot be achieved through negation of the physical but only through its reconfiguration. The failure to maintain abstraction is not a flaw but a revelation. It exposes the limits of language and thought and affirms the necessity of poetic invention in the face of metaphysical uncertainty. Stevens suggests that the vitality of poetry lies not in its capacity to stabilize meaning but in its willingness to inhabit contradiction.

The Dialectics of Impermanence:

The second section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction", titled "It Must Change," amplifies the contradictions established in the opening sequence by insisting that the Supreme Fiction must be dynamic and evolving. This stipulation directly contradicts the traditional metaphysical assumption that truth, to be meaningful, must be permanent. A reader might expect a "supreme" fiction to offer a definitive perspective, something unchanging in a world marked by flux. However, Stevens reverses this expectation by asserting that change is not only compatible with poetic supremacy but fundamental to it. He suggests that a fiction achieves supremacy precisely because it can remain responsive to the evolving consciousness of the poet and the historical moment. This pivot from permanence to transformation reframes poetry not as a static system of meaning but as a fluid process of renewal. The poem becomes a living thing, not a monument to an unchanging truth. Stevens does not reconcile the contradiction between fixity and fluidity; instead, he dramatizes it by embedding it into the form and content of the poem itself. The poetry of change resists closure, and Stevens makes this resistance the very principle of poetic vitality.

Stevens emphasizes the primacy of change through a passage that states, "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea" (Stevens, 1954, p. 382). On the surface, this line gestures toward a return to origins and invokes the possibility of re-experiencing a primordial truth. However, Stevens carefully frames this return as momentary and mediated. The poet does not offer the first idea itself, only a transient sensation of its presence. The phrase "for a moment" introduces an inevitable impermanence, and the idea remains abstract, a kind of haunting rather than a recoverable essence. Stevens's use of the word "refreshes" suggests a cyclic act, something akin to breathing rather than constructing. The poem acts not as a fixed representation of truth but as a regenerative force, perpetually reviving our awareness of the unknown without resolving it. In this formulation, change is not a deviation from the essence of truth but its very condition. The "first idea" recurs only through repetition and revision. Its reality depends on its transformation, and Stevens treats this mutability not as a loss but as the

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JALT

primary form through which modern poetry engages with meaning. Poetry becomes valuable because it refuses to stagnate, even when it seeks origins.

The figure of the "major man," introduced in this section, embodies the poetic subject who must continually remake both himself and the world through the act of imaginative creation. Stevens forges the identity of the major man that is inseparable from the dynamic process of creation (poetic invention). Yet this identity remains unstable. Because the poem must change, so must the self who writes it. The "major man" cannot rely on consistent beliefs or metaphysical guarantees. Instead, he becomes a fluctuating construct, always in motion, always becoming. This conceptualization resonates with Nietzsche's vision of the artist as a force of creation without appeal to static values. Like Nietzsche's Übermensch, Stevens's "major man" invents meaning in a void left by the collapse of traditional metaphysical systems. However, rather than proclaiming new values with authority, he performs the very instability he experiences. The poetic self is at once the originator of meaning and the product of poetic process. In aligning the poet's identity with the evolving nature of the poem, Stevens undermines the conventional notion of authorship as a stable source of insight. The voice in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is authoritative only to the extent that it embraces its own provisionality.

This radical reimagining of poetic identity feeds into one of the most significant ideological tensions in Stevens's work. He frames change as the only stable law in a world deprived of metaphysical certainty. "It Must Change" posits poetry as the medium best suited to this condition of flux. Stevens constructs a poetic logic in which the act of becoming supersedes the desire for arrival. The poem does not move toward a conclusion but loops through cycles of self-renewal. This conception aligns with Frank Kermode's idea of fiction as a process that generates a "sense of an ending" without providing finality (Kermode, 1967). Stevens ends the section not with a conclusive revelation but with an unresolved statement: "He is and may be" (p. 388). The ambiguity of "may be" suspends the reader in a space between being and potentiality, reinforcing the theme of continuous metamorphosis. By refusing to offer closure, Stevens affirms his commitment to a poetic structure that mirrors the instability of human knowledge and identity. The poem lives not through its conclusions but through its revisions.

Throughout "It Must Change," Stevens deploys formal strategies that mirror the philosophical content of the section. The grammar of the poem, for instance, shifts constantly between imperatives, conditionals, and future projections. This grammatical variety enacts the principle of transformation through language itself. Even the verb tenses resist settlement, a structural performance of the section's central claim. The poem not only speaks about change but performs it through syntax. Stevens's famous line "The poem refreshes life" operates in the present tense, suggesting that poetic renewal is not a completed act but an ongoing occurrence. That this refreshment lasts only "for a moment" emphasizes that even the act of imaginative recovery is subject to temporality. Truth, as presented here, cannot be extracted and stored. It must be continually rediscovered in ever-changing forms. Meaning emerges only through the movement between tenses, between what is posited and what might be. This instability does not create confusion but establishes a system of thought grounded in poetic dynamism.

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

Abstraction evolves into process, and the poem itself becomes an act of conceptual transformation. In this way, Stevens's Supreme Fiction does not remain supreme by offering fixed truths but by interrogating and revising its own premises. What ultimately changes most is not the world outside the poem but our understanding of what the poem itself can represent.

The Aporia of Poetic Pleasure:

The final section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction", "It Must Give Pleasure," completes Stevens's poetic manifesto by introducing an imperative that appears, at first glance, more straightforward than the previous two. After arguing that the supreme fiction must be abstract and that it must change, Stevens now declares that it must also give pleasure. However, this final requirement brings with it its own set of contradictions, for it insists on an emotional and aesthetic response from a poetic structure that has already committed itself to abstraction and mutability. If the poem refuses to offer fixed meaning and constantly transforms its symbols and speakers, can it still deliver genuine pleasure? Stevens's answer does not come through resolution. Instead, he constructs a poetics where pleasure is bound up with uncertainty and where joy arises precisely because the poem refuses to offer closure. In doing so, he produces a deeply modernist aesthetic: one that acknowledges its own incompleteness and finds satisfaction in the act of imaginative engagement rather than in metaphysical fulfillment.

Stevens opens this section with a deceptively simple claim in one of his other poems, titled "Of Modern Poetry": "It must be a finding of satisfaction, and may / Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman / Combing" (Stevens, 1954). These examples draw from the ordinary, grounding the possibility of pleasure in daily human activity. Yet these moments are not elevated into symbols of transcendence. The images are not metaphors for something beyond themselves. Rather, they point to a kind of aesthetic satisfaction that emerges from fleeting experience. By using the modal verb "may," Stevens emphasizes that pleasure is conditional. It cannot be guaranteed. The poet can offer moments that suggest fulfillment, but they remain open to interpretation. This introduces a paradox: the poem must give pleasure, but it can only do so if it allows readers to locate that pleasure for themselves. It cannot dictate how meaning should be received. Instead, it must open a space for interpretive freedom. In that sense, the imperative to give pleasure aligns with the earlier imperatives. The poem, like the reader, must remain in motion. The pleasure it provides is neither static nor complete. It is something provisional, dependent on a reader who is willing to dwell within the poem's ambiguities.

The final lines of the poem offer a playful but profound meditation on the nature of poetic understanding. "And they will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne," Stevens writes, evoking the idea that scholars will one day arrive at a definitive interpretation (Stevens, 1954 p. 406). But this line is clearly ironic. The very structure of the poem, built as it is on abstraction, change, and pleasure, undermines any notion of final comprehension. The closing statement, "And not to have is the beginning of desire," leaves the reader in a state of longing rather than satisfaction (Stevens, 1954 p. 382). Yet this longing is not a failure. It is the very source of poetic engagement. Pleasure, Stevens implies, is not about having. It is about reaching toward something just beyond one's

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grasp. It is about the desire to believe in a fiction that stabilizes but only temporarily and it never fully reveals itself. The supreme fiction gives pleasure by denying the very conditions that would make pleasure simple or complete.

In "It Must Give Pleasure," Stevens affirms the poem's role as a space of affective and imaginative intensity. However, he defines this intensity in terms that resist conventional aesthetic or philosophical resolution. The poem must give pleasure, but only through a process that destabilizes the reader's expectations and draws them into a complex engagement with language, perception, and belief. In this sense, the final section does not resolve the contradictions of the earlier ones. It amplifies them. By insisting on pleasure as both necessary and elusive, Stevens completes his vision of the supreme fiction as a modernist artifact. It is an object of desire rather than knowledge, a fiction that survives not because it convinces but because it compels.

Discussion and Findings:

The contradictions embedded within "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" do not operate merely as literary ornamentation or postmodern playfulness. Rather, they represent a foundational aspect of Stevens's poetic ideology that embody a mode of belief that is responsive to the philosophical ruptures of modernity. One of the central discoveries of this analysis is that Stevens offers a poetic model where belief is sustainable only if it acknowledges its own fictionality. The Supreme Fiction, as conceived by Stevens, gains power not through metaphysical certainty but through the imaginative commitment to uncertainty. Each of the poem's three imperatives, abstraction, change, and pleasure, exposes an ideal, only to immediately dismantle or revise it. This recursive process reveals that the poem's strength lies in its ability to generate meaning precisely through its refusal to stabilize. In other words, the contradictions are not narrative dead ends. They are generative mechanisms that both dramatize and authorize Stevens's poetics. The poem does not transcend modern uncertainty by resolving it, but by staging it in a form that invites reflection, renewal, and aesthetic intensity.

One of the key findings to emerge from this study is the recognition that Stevens is crafting a form of poetic faith that thrives not in spite of its instability, but because of it. Unlike traditional religious frameworks that assert fixed truths, Stevens's poetic system is marked by transience, revision, and interpretive flux. The Supreme Fiction is called supreme not because it offers certainty, but because it invites a continuous engagement with the unknown. This form of belief resists closure and completion. Instead, it embraces contradiction as the condition of its own persistence. The structure of the poem reflects this ethos, with each of the three parts enacting and then undoing the previous one's logic. "It Must Be Abstract" introduces the pursuit of metaphysical purity, only for "It Must Change" to unseat that pursuit through constant transformation. The final section, "It Must Give Pleasure," circles back to the human need for meaning and coherence, only to place that satisfaction beyond reach. The cumulative effect is a poetic framework that defines itself through the tensions it refuses to resolve. This suggests that Stevens's Supreme Fiction is less a metaphysical ideal than a performative gesture—one that redefines belief as a process rather than a destination.

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

Another significant conclusion of this research lies in the way Stevens fuses philosophical inquiry with poetic form. His engagement with Nietzschean creative destruction is evident in the way each poetic claim undermines its own authority. Yet unlike Nietzsche, who often sought the radical replacement of exhausted values, Stevens's vision is more recursive and introspective. He does not propose new doctrines so much as he performs the act of poetic imagining as an existential necessity. The influence of post-structuralist thought, particularly Derrida's concept of *différance*, resonates with Stevens's refusal to settle on any singular meaning. Stevens's poetic voice maintains a dialectical balance between skepticism and visionary intensity. The contradictions become enactments of a belief system that both interrogates and reinvents itself continuously.

A particularly striking finding concerns Stevens's conception of poetic pleasure. Rather than offering comfort, closure, or lyrical beauty, the pleasure of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is founded on resistance and complexity. The poem derives aesthetic and philosophical power from its refusal to gratify the reader's desire for stability. This refusal becomes pleasurable not because it resolves into some grand vision, but because it sharpens the reader's awareness of the process of meaning-making. Stevens creates a participatory poetics, one that demands intellectual collaboration from the reader. The poem's ambiguities are not accidental. They are essential to its ideological structure. By forcing the reader to navigate and interpret multiple, often contradictory assertions, Stevens generates a form of pleasure that is rooted in imaginative agency. The poem refuses to reveal its ultimate truth. Instead, it rewards the reader for engaging with its dissonance. This redefinition of pleasure aligns with modernist theories of aesthetic difficulty, yet Stevens extends this tradition by tying pleasure directly to the process of poetic and philosophical inquiry.

Finally, the contradictions that structure "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" offer insights that go beyond literary analysis. They serve as ontological propositions about the nature of belief, identity, and creation in a world where traditional sources of authority have eroded. Stevens constructs a model of artistic engagement that acknowledges its own fragility while affirming its relevance. The poem does not collapse under the weight of its paradoxes. Rather, it gains its vitality from them. It seeks abstraction but remains tethered to the material. It demands transformation but preserves key motifs across each section. It insists on pleasure but delivers it only through refusal and delay.

Through this close analysis, three major findings come into focus. First, the poem enacts an architecture of unbuilding. Each of its three imperatives constructs a framework only to undo it. Second, the poem performs key crises of modernist epistemology, including the instability of time, the recursive nature of subjectivity, and the limits of language as a reliable medium of meaning. Third, the work recasts the pleasure principle itself. Stevens makes the abstract sensuous, renders change permanent through poetic form, and finds pleasure in the very act of epistemological failure. These three discoveries support the broader claim that "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is not simply a modernist poem, it is a philosophical artifact. Its contradictions are not flaws to be explained away. They are the very conditions that allow it to speak meaningfully to a

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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

world fractured by historical trauma, philosophical skepticism, and aesthetic disillusionment.

Conclusion:

In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction", Wallace Stevens creates a poetic structure that is at once visionary and self-sabotaging, idealistic and skeptical. The poem does not resolve its tensions, nor does it aim to. Rather, it performs those tensions with unrelenting clarity and makes contradiction itself the condition of meaning. Throughout this study, the poem has been read as a text that transforms its own paradoxes into poetic method. Stevens's commitment to abstraction, his embrace of change, and his insistence on pleasure do not coalesce into a unified philosophical system. Instead, they generate a dynamic relationship of competing imperatives that constitute the Supreme Fiction's very power. This fiction does not claim truth in the traditional metaphysical sense. It asserts the necessity of constructing meaning precisely because truth has become inaccessible. The poem's greatness lies in its refusal to stabilize itself. Its tripartite structure enacts a cycle of assertion, deconstruction, and imaginative renewal that foregrounds the very fragility of belief while demonstrating its ongoing necessity. This cyclical logic positions the Supreme Fiction as a poetic prototype for modern consciousness, one that reflects the historical and philosophical ruptures of the twentieth century while proposing art as a space in which provisional belief can be creatively rehearsed.

A central insight of this analysis has been that Stevens does not offer a singular message or resolution to the philosophical crises he engages. Rather, he provides a poetic space in which those crises can be confronted through the faculties of imagination, skepticism, and aesthetic form. The poem does not merely describe contradiction; it embodies contradiction. The Supreme Fiction, then, is not an ideal to be reached but a perpetual mode of becoming. Stevens's poem advances a vision of poetry as a heterotopic site in which competing truths, emotional registers, and philosophical positions can coexist. This reading enables us to see "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" not as a closed philosophical argument but as an open field of imaginative possibility, one that affirms the ongoing work of meaning-making in a disenchanted world. Stevens does not abandon the ideal. He redefines it as a fiction that earns its authority by acknowledging its constructed nature and its inevitable impermanence.

Equally significant is the paradoxical role that Stevens assigns to the reader. This study has demonstrated that "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" refuses passive consumption. The reader is not merely a recipient of meaning but a co-creator of the poem's philosophical landscape. Each assertion invites skepticism, each negation prompts reconsideration, and each moment of clarity dissolves into further ambiguity. The poem does not ask the reader to resolve these tensions. Instead, it trains the reader to sustain them, to inhabit the dissonances with imaginative and intellectual openness. This practice aligns with Keats's notion of negative capability, yet Stevens radicalizes the concept by embedding it in the poem's formal architecture. The result is a reading experience that is intellectually demanding yet profoundly rewarding. The pleasure that emerges is not one of resolution but of engagement, not of coherence but of participation in a continually shifting field of meaning. This model of reading has profound implications for contemporary literary and cultural studies. In an age marked by

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JALT

ideological rigidity and algorithmic determinacy, Stevens's poetic logic offers a counter-example. It affirms that complexity, contradiction, and interpretive labor are not obstacles to understanding but the very materials through which meaningful reflection can occur. Stevens teaches us not how to believe, but how to invent belief in the absence of guarantees.

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