

Wallace Stevens: Hartford's Private Poet

When Wallace Stevens moved to Hartford from New York in 1916 to work in the insurance business, he was well-known in poetry circles but not yet acclaimed as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He had been married for seven years to a woman his family thought beneath him; they didn't attend the wedding. Elsie Kachel had been a milliner and a stenographer, and she posed as the model for the design of the Winged Liberty Head dime, which the U.S. minted from 1916 to 1945.

Stevens had cut off ties with his parents. And, outside of poetry and his work at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co., he also seemed to cut ties with the world. He didn't appear to care at all about the lack of attention from the press and often went out of his way to avoid it.

Poetry: A Magazine of Verse awarded Stevens its most important prize for a group of poems in 1920, three years before his first book, "Harmonium," was published when he was 44 — but the honor went unnoticed in Hartford.

Elsie does pop up in The Hartford Courant in 1920 as Mrs. Wallace Stevens, but only among a list of people who were assisting the chairman of the Hartford Musical Club — which was postponing its meeting. When The Dial magazine asked Stevens for a biographical sketch to accompany several poems that were to be published in 1922, he begged off: "Do, please, excuse me from the biographical note. I am a lawyer and live in Hartford. But such facts are neither gay nor instructive."

For a long stretch, the Courant's lack of attention shouldn't be surprising.

After the birth of his daughter Holly in 1924, Stevens stopped writing poetry for about nine years. Many letters from 1925 to 1933 are devoted to genially fending off requests from Louis Untermeyer, Marianne Moore and others for his poems, to include in anthologies and poetry reviews.

"She babbles and plays with her hands and smiles like an angel," Stevens wrote to Harriet Monroe, the editor of Poetry, in 1925. "Such experiences are a terrible blow to literature."

"All lights are out at nine," he explained to Marianne Moore of the Dial, turning down an invitation to write a review. And, he explained to her in 1927, "The extreme irregularity of my life makes poetry out of the question, for the present."

"Nothing short of a coup d'état would make it possible for me to write poetry now," he apologized to Lincoln Kirstein of Hound and Horn in 1931.

But by 1932 he had started to send "scraps" to Monroe, almost apologetically.

"I wish it were possible for me to come to the aid of Poetry," he wrote.

Around this time, in 1932 The Courant ran as real estate news a photo of the home Stevens had purchased at 118 Westerly Terrace in Hartford's West End, near Elizabeth Park. This would become the poet's lifelong home, and, never having learned, or bothered to learn, to drive, Stevens walked the 2 miles between home and the office for many years, composing his poems in his head.

And there were the briefest of snippets of newspaper coverage.

In an article about a forthcoming reading by Monroe, the editor of Poetry, The Courant briefly refers to Stevens as a "local writer" who had won two prizes from the magazine.

And a short article in The Courant about Wesleyan University professor Wilbert Snow's 1934 talk to the New England Library Association mentions in passing that he had praised Stevens as "a poet's poet."

In 1936, Stevens won the famed Nation Prize for poetry, an achievement unremarked in The Hartford Courant. That same year, The Courant did report that Stevens had been promoted to vice president of The Hartford, and three other men had been named assistant secretaries. Stevens' appointment was the lead news, but only three men were pictured. There was no photograph of Stevens.

A three-sentence news brief in 1945 notes that Stevens had been named to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Another three-sentence brief a year later reports that Stevens had won the Monroe Poetry Award.

'Virtually Unknown' And 'An Oddity'

As Christine Palm, former president of the Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, put it in an article in the Hog River Journal: "...during his most productive years in his adopted hometown of Hartford, he remained

virtually unknown to his neighbors and an oddity to his coworkers. He deliberately kept the city at arm's length while drawing inspiration from it." (The group's name is a play on the name of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music, whose members, including Stevens himself, met at the Wadsworth Atheneum to hear works by avant-garde composers like Stravinsky.)

While notoriously prickly and solitary, Stevens wasn't completely antisocial. In an essay titled "Searching for Wallace Stevens" in "Twain's World: Essays on Hartford's Cultural Heritage," Steve Kemper reports that Stevens sometimes walked to work with Harry Tyler Smith, who worked at Aetna.

Smith would whistle Wagner as the two men walked. But when the Aetna company bus passed by, and Smith's co-workers urged him to get in, they wouldn't invite Stevens to ride with them.

Asked to repeat at the Atheneum a lecture he had given in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, Stevens declined: "Sorry. In Hartford I'm known as a businessman."

It's almost confounding that the taciturn and aloof Stevens worked early on as a newspaper writer. Accepted in 1897 at Harvard, nine days after he applied, he had proposed a two-year course of study: "I only desire a college education in journalism." According to J. Donald Blount, editor of "The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie," Stevens outlined the courses he proposed to take, because they were "adapted to the study of journalism. Because as a course they are broad and catholic benefiting the student in any event. Because they are just what I want, lacking nothing nor superfluous in any thing."

Years later, explaining his lushly complex poems would clearly have struck him as superfluous.

In "Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered," Peter Brazeau recounts the insurance executive's reply to an acquaintance who was baffled by one of his poems.

"It isn't necessary that you understand my poetry or any poetry," Stevens reportedly said. "It's only necessary that the writer understand it."

Helen Vendler, a professor at Harvard renowned for helping readers appreciate poetry, writes that Stevens once told another acquaintance, "I don't think you'd understand this unless you wrote it."

Eventually, his hometown newspaper caught up with Stevens. By then he was 70.

It was 1950, and he had won Yale University's Bollingen Poetry Prize for his "contribution to American poetry" and the National Book Award. The Courant noted that "in Hartford, he has avoided not only the glare of publicity but any publicity at all."

In a feature story two weeks later, Edward Parone wrote in The Courant that when Stevens was awarded the Bollingen prize, "he was almost a stranger in his own home-town. Then partially emerging from a fur cup of anecdotal legend he further contributed to that legend ... when, on the occasion of this recent, and only, public honor, he was asked, by telephone to see a reporter for a statement, Mr. Stevens said, 'I have nothing to say except Hooray,' and hung up."

Parone observes: "It is not that Mr. Stevens, incidentally, has never rhymed before but one does not expect him to rhyme at such a time."

A bit frustrated, Parone then goes on, with something of a journalistic pout: "Because no one will ever know what Mr. Stevens eats for breakfast and because there is a compulsion in people to bring the poet as well as the Chief Executive down to a nice, folksy level, everyone wants to know All about him. Mr. Stevens' one answer has always been, 'Read my poems.' That's an answer that of course pleases no one."

Parone also writes that Stevens recently had consented to have a new photograph taken by the newspaper: "'Can we come out right away?' asked the reporter. 'Good heavens, no,' was the answer. 'I never wear a clean shirt on a rainy day. Some nice sunny day...' Click!"

The 'Peculiarly Yankee Sound' Of Certain Words

Further prizes and press accolades came in a flurry over the last five years of Stevens' life, until his death in 1955. In 1954, The Courant published Trinity College Assistant Professor Samuel F. Morse's lengthy appreciation of the poet's and insurance executive's "remarkable accomplishments in two worlds." Stevens told him the walk to work every morning from his home took 46 minutes.

"Walking and thinking go well together," Morse wrote. "A good many of the things Wallace Stevens has seen on his walks get into his poetry. Statues in parks, stone lions in front of buildings, the Connecticut River, forsythia bushes in bloom against an early spring sky, chalk marks scrawled on the sidewalk. Anyone living in Hartford could recognize names and places in some of the poems, even though Mr. Stevens has said that

he sometimes uses certain words because he likes their peculiarly Yankee sound, one of his favorites being 'Haddam.'"

In another tribute published in The Courant, Morse pointed out that Stevens is often thought to be difficult, "but the gaiety of his work usually survives the solemn comments written about it." After all, this was a man who playfully titled one of his poems "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

Stevens won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, just months before he died, and the Hartford City Council was eager to honor him. According to the May 15, 1955, story in The Courant, the deputy mayor, James Kinsella, wrote a resolution to praise and congratulate the "pre-eminent artist and citizen of Hartford."

It began: "Whereas, the vivid and perceptive imagery and imagination of the poetry of Wallace Stevens has received international acclaim among those more or less appreciative of his esoteric and distinguished art style..."

To Kinsella's dismay, the city clerk reading the full resolution aloud before the council voted read the word "esoteric" as "erotic."

Assuming he ever even heard about the goof, Stevens must have been amused.

Legacy: The Wallace Stevens Walk



The 11th granite marker on the Wallace Stevens Walk is at the corner of Terry Road and Westerly Terrace where the poet lived. (Cloe Poisson, cpoisson@courant.com)

STEVE GRANT

Among Hartford's literary luminaries over the past two centuries, Wallace Stevens is right there: That is, wholly within the shadow of Mark Twain.

Twain is the subject of constant scholarship, essays and books. Stevens is the poet some Connecticut people have heard of but never read.

But Stevens is regarded as a major American poet. He won a Pulitzer Prize, National Book awards and many other honors. He has his passionate devotees, if comparatively small in number. Just a couple of years ago, The Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens, less formally known as the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, put together something very appropriate and clever that will help ensure the Stevens literary legacy endures.

They created the Wallace Stevens Walk, which follows the route Stevens took every day from his home at 118 Westerly Terrace in Hartford's west end to his office at the Hartford Accident & Indemnity Co. building, now part of the Hartford Group 690 Asylum Avenue, where he became a vice president.

It is perfect for a half-day outing in the fall, with fall foliage color brightening the cityscape amid often-comfortable temperatures. One way, it is 2.4 miles, or 4.8 miles round trip, mostly down Asylum Avenue, with Hartford landmarks all along the route.

Though he wasn't born in Hartford, Stevens spent most of his life in the city. If the image of a poet is a financially struggling bohemian type, Stevens was the antithesis — a successful insurance executive who wore gray suits every day, even weekends. He lived a most comfortable life in a neighborhood of Hartford's biggest and most expensive homes. He did not believe poets needed to fit an anti-establishment mold. For him, financial security assured intellectual freedom. In a city that is all about financial security, maybe Stevens is its perfect literary manifestation.

Perhaps the most radical thing the man ever did was not learning to drive. So he walked to work, sometimes composing poetry as he did — hence the Wallace Stevens Walk.

Thirteen granite markers were placed along the route Stevens walked, each with a stanza from one of his most famous poems, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

These stanzas are not necessarily easily digested intellectually.

"A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird

Are one."

OK. So I asked the president of The Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens about the man and his poetry. Stevens often explored the difference between the way we experience things in our imagination and the way we experience them in reality, says Jim Finnegan of West Hartford.

That the stanzas can be intriguing is actually a plus. The group has heard from a number of people who have come upon one of the granite stones, read the stanza and discovered the rest of the poem — and Stevens — through an Internet search. The walk happens to take you right by a number of Hartford landmarks beginning with the Hartford Group itself, where the first stone was placed, curbside. You can't miss it. Nearby is the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, the large, Gothic brownstone church dating to 1866, where the second stone marker can be found. In addition to the stone markers, there is much to see on this walk. There are old, sizable trees, many of them historically or otherwise notable. At the corner of Woodland Street and Asylum, on the grounds of St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, there is the largest known specimen of a shingle oak in the state. Nearby is an enormous sassafras tree. Some of the most interesting trees on the grounds are marked.

Continuing west, standing almost all by itself next to the main entrance to the Hartford Classical Magnet School is an extremely rare hybrid buckeye.

The nearby Connecticut Historical Society is a possible extra stop for walkers. Another is Elizabeth Park, where there are gardens and scores of impressive trees to explore. Stevens himself often walked in Elizabeth Park, and used the park in some of his poetry.

The walk continues into the comfortable residential neighborhood of larger homes where Stevens lived. The entire route is on sidewalks.

As for the "Enemies" in the informal name of the Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens, it is partly a nod to Stevens sometimes off-putting personality, as well as an acknowledgement that modern poetry, even poetry from the mid-20th century, can be difficult.

The website for Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens, with a map of the walk, is

www.stevenspoetry.org

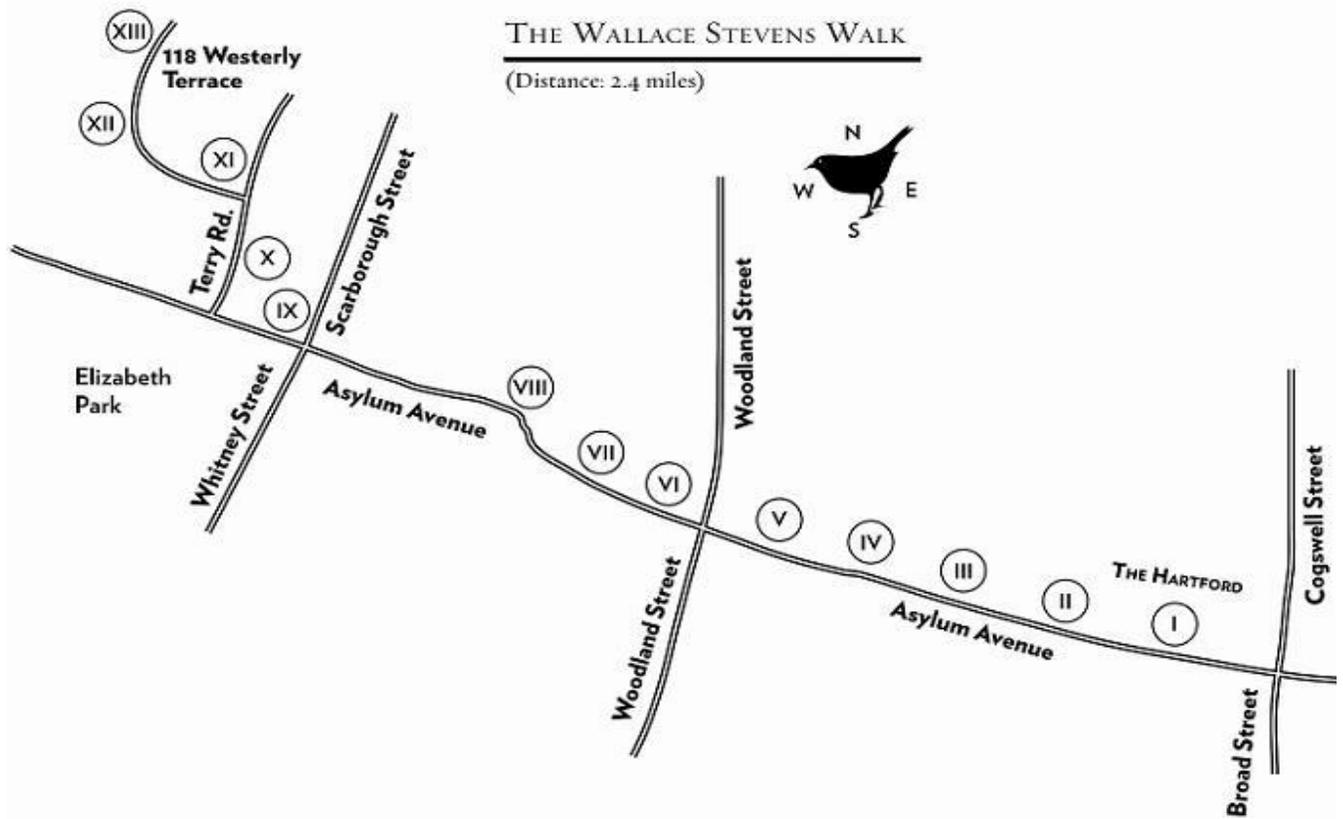
FRIENDS & ENEMIES OF WALLACE STEVENSON

THE WALLACE STEVENS WALK

Follow the footsteps of a major American poet...

Wallace Stevens, who never learned to drive, walked to work, often composing poetry along the way. The Wallace Stevens Walk invites you to retrace the steps of the poet's imagination from his workplace, The Hartford building at 690 Asylum Avenue, to his former home at 118 Westerly Terrace.

Thirteen Connecticut granite stones mark the course of the walk, each inscribed with a stanza from his poem, "[Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.](#)"



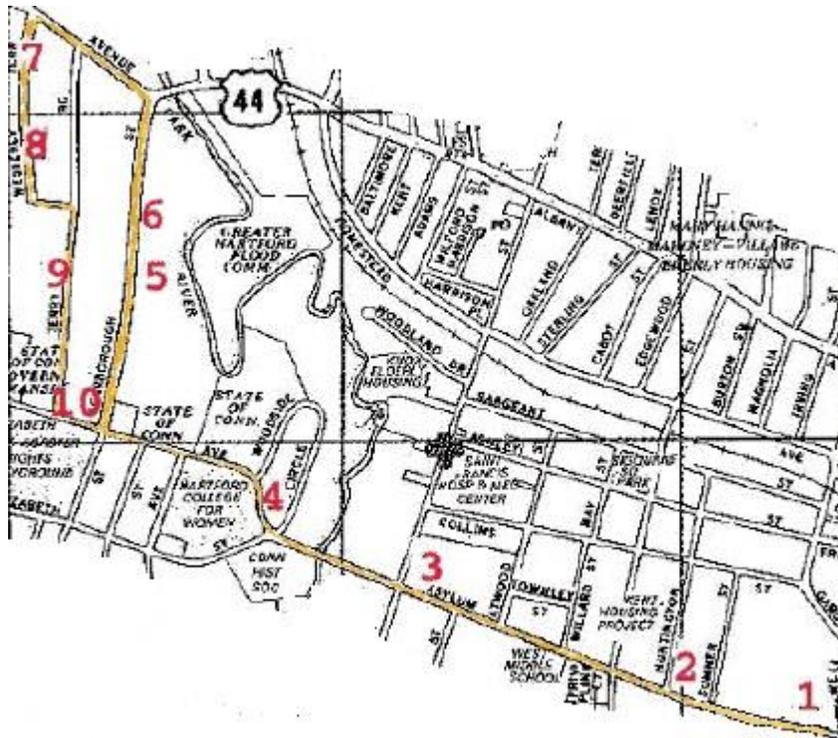
The Friends & Enemies of Wallace Stevens conceived this tribute and the generous contributions of many friends and the support of [The Hartford Financial Services Group](#) made the walk possible.
Dedicated in 2009.

Special thanks to architect [John Orofino](#) who designed the stones and coordinated their installation, and to [Bei, Williams & Zito](#), the company that fabricated and installed the thirteen stones and the bronze plaque.

Wallace Stevens Walking Tour Intro

Poetry is not my thing. In fact, I've been known to unfairly smear the whole genre with the broad insulting stroke of, "I hate poetry." This, of course, isn't really true at all. I'm more ignorant of poetry than disdainful of it. So I'm open to learning something about it, by way of a cool new little walk in northwest Hartford, following the daily path of one Wallace Stevens.

Wallace Stevens... Whom I'd never heard of (see? Totally ignorant.) before finding something online regarding this walk. As I continued searching, I was deluged with an abundance of Wallace Stevens information. Wow, this guy was a really well-respected poet – and person it turns out. And he lived a mere 3.8 miles from my house... as a crow flies.



Old-school map of the Walk

A crow... Or a black bird of some sort. Ah, segues... my forte For you see, the Wallace Stevens Walk has been accentuated with handsome granite blocks etched with Stevens' most popular poem, "Thirteen ways of looking at a Blackbird." Each of the thirteen stanzas have been etched on separate blocks beginning near downtown at The Hartford building and ending at his relatively modest house on Westerly Terrace – 2.4 miles in all.

Every morning Wallace Stevens walked two miles from his home at 118 Westerly Terrace to his office at 690 Asylum Avenue. In the evening he walked back. He occupied himself on this pedestrian commute by composing poetry in his head. Even on weekends Stevens, who never learned to drive, enjoyed long walks in the city. We hope you will enjoy following the poet's walk.

Okay, [whatever they say](#).

And you know what? I kind of like the poem – and I really like not only the walk, but the idea of it as well. The only negative about it is that Google hasn't converted all of Asylum Avenue to Streetview yet. Asylum is one of Hartford's most important thoroughfares.

It's funny, Hoang drives this Walk every day to go to work and never knew it existed. And I'm sure she'll never read this and continue to drive on in ignorance of the Wallace Stevens Walk. I don't know how she sleeps at night.

Let t's get to it already

1. Hartford Accident and Indemnity Building. Now The Hartford Insurance Group
2. Heading west toward the Asylum Hill Congregational Church
3. Saint Francis Hospital
4. The neighborhood turns residential through the Asylum Avenue curves
5. Chick Austin, the Wadsworth Atheneum director and Stevens' neighbor, lived here
6. Scarborough Street is still a formal boulevard
7. Wallace Stevens' house at 118 Westerly Terrace
8. Looking down Westerly Terrace
9. Heading South on Terry Road
10. Elizabeth Park from across Asylum Avenue

Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens



Born

October 2, 1879
[Reading](#), Pennsylvania, U.S.

Died	August 2, 1955 (aged 75) Hartford , Connecticut, U.S.
Occupation	Poet, lawyer, insurance executive
Period	1914–1955
Literary movement	Modernism
Notable works	Harmonium "The Idea of Order at Key West" The Man With the Blue Guitar The Auroras of Autumn "Of Modern Poetry"
Notable awards	Robert Frost Medal (1951)
Spouse	Elsie Viola Kachel (m. 1909–1955)
Children	Holly Stevens (1924–1992)
Signature	

Wallace Stevens (October 2, 1879 – August 2, 1955) was an American [modernist](#) poet. He was born in [Reading, Pennsylvania](#), educated at [Harvard](#) and then [New York Law School](#), and he spent most of his life working as an executive for an insurance company in [Hartford, Connecticut](#). He won the [Pulitzer Prize for Poetry](#) for his *Collected Poems* in 1955.

Stevens' first period of writing begins with his 1923 publication of the [Harmonium](#) collection, followed by a slightly revised and amended second edition in 1930. His second period occurred in the eleven years immediately preceding the publication of his *Transport to Summer*, when Stevens had written three volumes of poems including *Ideas of Order*, [The Man with the Blue Guitar](#), *Parts of the World*, along with *Transport to Summer*. His third and final period of writing poems occurred with the publication of *The Auroras of Autumn* in the early 1950s followed by the release of his *Collected Poems* in 1954 a year before his death.

His best-known poems include [The Auroras of Autumn](#), "[Anecdote of the Jar](#)", "[Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock](#)", "[The Emperor of Ice-Cream](#)", "[The Idea of Order at Key West](#)", "[Sunday Morning](#)", "[The Snow Man](#)", and "[Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird](#)".

Sevens was born in Reading, [Pennsylvania](#), in 1879 into a [Lutheran](#) family in the line of John Zeller, his maternal great-grandfather, who had settled in the [Susquehanna Valley](#) in 1709 as a religious refugee.^[1]

The son of a prosperous lawyer, Stevens attended [Harvard](#) as a non-degree three-year special student from 1897 to 1900. According to his biographer Milton Bates, Stevens was introduced personally to the philosopher [George Santayana](#) living in Boston at the time and was strongly influenced by Santayana's book *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900).^[2] Holly Stevens, his daughter, recalled her father's long dedication to Santayana when she posthumously reprinted her father's collected letters in 1977 for Knopf.^[3] In one of his early journals, Stevens gave an account of spending an evening with Santayana in early 1900 and sympathizing with Santayana regarding a poor review which was published at that time concerning Santayana's *Interpretations* book.^[4] After his Harvard years, Stevens moved to New York City and briefly worked as a journalist. He then attended [New York Law School](#), graduating with a law degree in 1903 following the example of his two other brothers with law degrees.

On a trip back to Reading in 1904 Stevens met Elsie Viola Kachel (1886–1963, also known as Elsie Moll), a young woman who had worked as a saleswoman, milliner, and stenographer.^[5] After a long courtship, he married her in 1909 over the objections of his parents, who considered her poorly educated and lower-class. As *The New York Times* reported in an article in 2009, "Nobody from his family attended the wedding, and Stevens never again visited or spoke to his parents during his father's lifetime."^[6] A daughter, Holly, was born in 1924. She was baptized [Episcopalian](#) and later posthumously edited her father's letters and a collection of his poems.^[3]



Stevens' wife, Elsie, may have been a model for the national [Walking Liberty half dollar](#) when the couple lived in New York City

In 1913, the Stevenses rented a New York City apartment from sculptor [Adolph A. Weinman](#), who made a bust of Elsie. Her striking profile was later used on Weinman's 1916–1945 [Mercury dime](#) design and possibly for the head of the [Walking Liberty Half Dollar](#). In later years Elsie Stevens began to exhibit symptoms of mental illness and the marriage suffered as a result, but the couple remained married.^[6] In his biography of Stevens, [Paul Mariani](#) relates that the couple was largely

estranged, separated by nearly a full decade in age, though living in the same home by the mid-1930s stating, "...there were signs of domestic fracture to consider. From the beginning Stevens, who had not shared a bedroom with his wife for years now, moved into the master bedroom with its attached study on the second floor."^[7] Helen Vendler in her study of Stevens indicated that his marriage to a woman with a ninth grade education was not without concern for Stevens who was also physically almost twice the size of his diminutive wife who was nearly a full foot shorter in height than her husband and weighed over 100 pounds less than the large framed Stevens.

Career

After working in several New York law firms between 1904 and 1907, he was hired in January, 1908, as a lawyer for the American Bonding Company.^[9] By 1914 he had become vice-president of the New York office of the Equitable Surety Company of [St. Louis, Missouri](#).^[10] When this job was made redundant after a merger in 1916, he joined the home office of [Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company](#)^[11] and moved to [Hartford](#), where he would remain for the rest of his life.



Stevens' Hartford residence.

His career as a businessman-lawyer by day and a poet during his leisure time has received significant attention as summarized in the Thomas Grey book dealing with his insurance executive career. Grey has summarized parts of the responsibilities of Stevens' day-to-day life which involved the evaluation of surety insurance claims by stating: "If Stevens rejected a claim and the company was sued, he would hire a local lawyer to defend the case in the place where it would be tried. Stevens would instruct the outside lawyer through a letter reviewing the facts of the case and setting out the company's substantive legal position; he would then step out of the case, delegating all decisions on procedure and litigation strategy."^[12]

In 1917 Stevens and his wife moved to 210 Farmington Avenue where they remained for the next seven years and where he completed his first book of poems, [Harmonium](#). From 1924 to 1932 he resided at 735 Farmington Avenue. In 1932 he purchased a 1920s Colonial at **118 Westerly Terrace** where he resided for the remainder of his life. According to his biographer [Paul Mariani](#), [Stevens was financially independent as an insurance executive earning by the mid-1930s "\\$20,000 a year, equivalent to about \\$350,000 today \(2016\)](#). And this at time (during [The Great Depression](#)) when many Americans were out of work, searching through trash cans for food."

By 1934, he had been named vice-president of the company, After he won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) in 1955, he was offered a faculty position at Harvard but declined since it would have required him to give up

his vice-presidency of The Hartford.^[17] Throughout his life, Stevens was politically conservative and was described by the critic [William York Tindall](#) as a [Republican](#) in the mold of [Robert A. Taft](#).

Travel

Stevens made numerous visits to [Key West](#), Florida, between 1922 and 1940, usually staying at the Casa Marina hotel on the Atlantic Ocean. He first visited in January 1922, while on a business trip. "The place is a paradise," he wrote to Elsie, "midsummer weather, the sky brilliantly clear and intensely blue, the sea blue and green beyond what you have ever seen." The influence of Key West upon Stevens's poetry is evident in many of the poems published in his first two collections, *Harmonium* and [Ideas of Order](#).^[22] In February 1935, Stevens encountered the poet [Robert Frost](#) at the Casa Marina. The two men argued, and Frost reported that Stevens had been drunk and acted inappropriately.^[23] According to his biographer [Paul Mariani](#), Stevens often visited speakeasy establishments during the prohibition with both lawyer friends and poetry acquaintances.

The following year, Stevens was in an altercation with [Ernest Hemingway](#) at a party at the Waddell Avenue home of a mutual acquaintance in Key West.^[25] Stevens broke his hand, apparently from hitting Hemingway's jaw, and was repeatedly knocked to the street by Hemingway. Stevens later apologized.^[26] [Paul Mariani](#), a biographer of Stevens, relates this as,

... directly in front of Stevens was the very nemesis of his Imagination-- the antipoet poet (Hemingway), the poet of extraordinary reality, as Stevens would later call him, which put him in the same category as that other antipoet, William Carlos Williams, except that Hemingway was fifteen years younger and much faster than Williams, and far less friendly. So it began, with Stevens swinging at the bespectacled Hemingway, who seemed to weave like a shark, and Papa hitting him one-two and Stevens going down 'spectacularly,' as Hemingway would remember it, into a puddle of fresh rainwater.^[27]

In 1940, Stevens made his final trip to Key West. Frost was at the Casa Marina again, and again the two men argued.^[28] As related by Paul Mariani in his biography of Stevens the exchange in Key West in February 1940 included the following comments:

Stevens: Your poems are too academic.

Frost: Your poems are too executive.

Stevens: The trouble with you Robert, is that you write about subjects.

Frost: The trouble with you, Wallace, is that you write about bric-a-brac.^[29]

Post-war poetry

By late February 1947 with Stevens approaching 67 years of age, it became apparent that Stevens had completed the most productive ten years of his life in writing poetry. February 1947 saw the publication of his volume of poems titled *Transport to Summer*, which was positively received by F. O. Matthiessen writing for *The New York Times*. In the eleven years immediately preceding its publication, Stevens had written three volumes of poems including *Ideas of Order*, [The Man with the](#)

[Blue Guitar](#), *Parts of the World*, along with *Transport to Summer*. These were all written before Stevens would take up the writing of his well-received poem titled [The Auroras of Autumn](#).

In 1950–1951 when Stevens received news that Santayana had retired to live at a retirement institution in Rome for his final years, Stevens composed his poem "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" in memory of his mentor while a student at Harvard: "It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,/ With every visible thing enlarged and yet/ No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns, / The immensest theatre, the pillowed porch,/ The book and candle in your ambered room."

Last illness and death

As reported by his biographer [Paul Mariani](#), Stevens maintained a large, corpulent figure throughout most of his life, standing at 6 feet 2 inches and weighing as much as 240 pounds, which required some treating doctors to put him on medical diets during his lifetime. On March 28, 1955 Stevens went to see Dr. James Moher for accumulating detriments to his health. Dr. Moher's examination did not reveal anything and ordered Stevens to undergo an x-ray and barium enema on April 1, neither of which showed anything. On April 19 Stevens underwent a G.I. series that revealed diverticulitis, a gallstone, and a severely bloated stomach. Stevens was admitted to St. Francis Hospital and on April 26 he was operated on by Dr. Benedict Landry.

It was determined that Stevens was suffering from [stomach cancer](#) in the lower region by the large intestines and blocking the normal digestion of food. Lower tract oncology of a malignant nature was almost always a mortal diagnosis in the 1950s, although this direct information was withheld from Stevens even though his daughter Holly was fully informed and advised not to tell her father. Stevens was released in a temporarily improved ambulatory condition on May 11 and returned to his home on Westerly Terrace to recuperate. His wife insisted on trying to attend to him as he recovered but she had suffered a stroke in the previous winter and she was not able to assist as she had hoped. Stevens entered the Avery Convalescent Hospital on May 20.^[331]

By early June he was still sufficiently stable to attend a ceremony at the University of Hartford to receive an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree.^[331] On June 13 he traveled to New Haven to collect an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Yale University.^[331] On June 20 he returned to his home at Westerly Terrace and insisted on working for limited hours.^[341] On July 21 Stevens was readmitted to St. Francis Hospital and his condition deteriorated.^[351] On August 1, though bedridden, he had revived sufficiently to speak some parting words to his daughter before falling asleep after normal visiting hours were over; he was found deceased the following morning on August 2, 1955 at eight-thirty in the morning.^[361] He is buried in Hartford's [Cedar Hill Cemetery](#).

[Paul Mariani](#) in his biography of Stevens, indicates that friends of Stevens were aware that throughout his years and many visits to New York City that Stevens was in the habit of visiting [St Patrick's Cathedral](#) for meditative purposes while in New York. Stevens debated questions of [theodicy](#) with Fr. Arthur Hanley during his final weeks, and was eventually converted to Catholicism in April 1955 by Fr. Arthur Hanley, chaplain of St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, where Stevens spent his last days suffering from stomach cancer.^{[371][381]} This purported [deathbed conversion](#) is disputed, particularly by Stevens's daughter, Holly, who was not present at the time of the conversion according to Fr. Hanley. The conversion has been confirmed by both Fr. Hanley and a witnessing nun present at the time of the conversion and communion.^{[401][411]} Stevens's obituary in the local newspaper was minimal at the request of the family as to the details of his death. The obituary

for Stevens which appeared in *Poetry* magazine was assigned to [William Carlos Williams](#) who felt it suitable and justified to compare the poetry of his deceased friend to the writings of Dante in his *Vita Nuova* and to Milton in his *Paradise Lost*.^[42] At the end of his life, Stevens had left uncompleted his larger ambition to rewrite Dante's *Divine Comedy* for those who "live in the world of Darwin and not the world of Plato."

Reception

Stevens with [B. R. Ambedkar](#), the father of [Indian Constitution](#), at [Columbia University](#) on 5 June 1952

Early 20th century

The initial reception of the poetry of Stevens followed the publication of his first collection of poems published as *Harmonium* in the early 1920s. Comments on the poems were made by fellow poets and a small number of critics including [William Carlos Williams](#) and Hi Simons. Helen Vendler, in her book on Stevens' poetry, commented that much of the early reception of his poems was oriented to the symbolic reading of his poems often using simple substitution of metaphors and imagery for their asserted equivalents in meaning. For Vendler, this method of reception and interpretation was often limited in its usefulness and would eventually be replaced by more effective forms of literary evaluation and review.

Following Stevens' death in 1955, the literary interpretation of his poetry and critical essays began to flourish with full-length books written about his poems by such prominent literary scholars as [Helen Vendler](#) and [Harold Bloom](#). Vendler's two books on Stevens' poetry distinguished his short poems and his long poems and suggested that these poems be considered under separate forms of literary interpretation and critique. Her studies of the longer poems are in her book titled *On Extended Wings* and lists Stevens' longer poems as including [The Comedian as the Letter C](#), [Sunday Morning](#), [Le Monocle de Mon Oncle](#), [Like Decorations in the Nigger Cemetery](#), [Owl's Clover](#), [The Man with the Blue Guitar](#), [Examination of the Hero in a Time of War](#), [Notes toward a Supreme Fiction](#), [Esthétique du Mal](#), [Description without Place](#), [Credences of Summer](#), [The Auroras of Autumn](#), and his last long poem [An Ordinary Evening in New Haven](#).^[81] Another full length study of Stevens' poetry in the late 20th century is titled *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens* by Daniel Fuchs.

Early 21st century

Interest in the reading and reception of Stevens' poetry continues into the early 21st century with a full volume dedicated in the *Library of America* to the collected writings and poetry of Stevens. [Charles Altieri](#) in his book on the reading of Stevens as a poet of what Altieri calls 'philosophical poetry' presents his own reading of such philosophers as Hegel and Wittgenstein while presenting a speculative interpretation of Stevens under this interpretative approach.^[44] [Simon Critchley](#) in his 2016 book *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* indicates a refinement concerning the appreciation of the interaction of reality and poetry in the poems of Wallace Stevens stating: "Steven's late poems stubbornly show how the mind cannot seize hold of the ultimate nature of reality that faces it. Reality retreats before the imagination that shapes and orders it. Poetry is therefore the experience of failure. As Stevens puts it in a famous late poem, the poet gives us ideas about the thing, not the thing itself."^[45]

[Interpretation](#)[\[edit\]](#)

The reception of the poetry of Stevens and its interpretation has been widespread and of diverse orientation. Leonard and Wharton in their book *The Fluent Mundo* indicate at least four such schools of interpretation beginning with the prime advocates of Stevens found in the critics Harvey Pearce and Helen Regeuro who supported the thesis "that Stevens's later poetry denies the value of imagination for the sake of an unobstructed view of the 'things themselves'".^[46] The next school of interpretation which is identified by Leonard and Wharton is the Romantic school of interpretation led by Joseph Riddel, [Harold Bloom](#), James Baird and [Helen Vendler](#). A third school of Stevens interpretation is found who see Stevens as heavily dependent on 20th century Continental philosophy which includes [J. Hillis Miller](#), Thomas J. Hines, and Richard Macksey. A fourth school sees Stevens as fully [Husserlian](#) or [Heideggerian](#) in approach and tone of writing and which is led by Hines, Macksey, [Simon Critchley](#), Glauco Cambon, and [Paul Bove](#).^[46] These four schools of interpretations offer occasional agreement and disagreement of perspective, for example, Critchley of the Heideggerian school reads the interpretation by Bloom of Stevens as being in the [anti-realist](#) school while seeing Stevens as not being in the anti-realist school of poetic interpretation.^[47]

[Maturity of poetry](#)[\[edit\]](#)

Stevens is a rare example of a poet whose main output came largely only as he approached forty years of age. His first major publication (four poems from a sequence entitled "Phases" in the November 1914 edition of *Poetry*)^[48] was written at age 35, although as an undergraduate at Harvard, Stevens had written poetry and exchanged sonnets with [George Santayana](#), with whom he was close through much of his life. Many of his canonical works were written well after he turned 50. According to the literary critic [Harold Bloom](#), who called Stevens the "best and most representative" American poet of the time,^[49] no Western writer since [Sophocles](#) has had such a late flowering of artistic genius. His contemporary, [Harriet Monroe](#), termed Stevens "a poet, rich and numerous and profound, provocative of joy, creative beauty in those who can respond to Him".^[50] [Helen Vendler](#) notes that there are three distinguishable moods present in Stevens' long poems: ecstasy, apathy, and reluctance between ecstasy and apathy.^[8] She also notes that his poetry was highly influenced by the paintings of [Paul Klee](#) and [Paul Cézanne](#):

Stevens saw in the paintings of both Paul Klee—who was his favorite painter—and Cézanne the kind of work he wanted to do himself as a Modernist poet. Klee had imagined symbols. Klee is not a

directly realistic painter and is full of whimsical and fanciful and imaginative and humorous projections of reality in his paintings. The paintings are often enigmatic or full of riddles, and Stevens liked that as well. What Stevens liked in Cézanne was the reduction, you might say, of the world to a few monumental objects.^[51]

Stevens's first book of poetry, a volume titled *Harmonium*, was published in 1923, and republished in a second edition in 1930. Two more books of his poetry were produced during the 1920s and 1930s and three more in the 1940s. He received the annual [National Book Award for Poetry](#) twice, in 1951 for *The Auroras of Autumn*^{[52][53]} and in 1955 for *Collected Poems*.

Imagination and realit

For Thomas Grey, a Stevens biographer specializing in attention to Stevens as a businessman lawyer, Stevens in part related his poetry to his imaginative capacities as a poet while assigning his lawyer's duties more to the reality of making ends meet in his personal life. Grey finds the poem "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" as useful to understanding the approach which Stevens took in his life separating between his poetry and his profession stating: "The law and its prose were separate from poetry, and supplied a form of relief for Stevens by way of contrast with poetry, as the milkman (portrayed as the realist in the poem) relieves from the moonlight, as the walk around the block relieves the writer's trance like absorption. But the priority was clear: imagination, poetry, and secrecy, pursued after hours were primary, good in themselves; reason, prose, and clarity, indulged in during working hours, were secondary and instrumental".

In writing for the *Southern Review*, Hi Simons typified much of the early Stevens as being a juvenile romantic subjectivist before becoming a realist and naturalist in his more mature and more widely recognized idiom of later years.^[57] Stevens, whose work became meditative and philosophical, became very much a poet of ideas.^[49] "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully,"^[58] he wrote. Concerning the relation between [consciousness](#) and the world, in Stevens's work "imagination" is not equivalent to consciousness nor is "reality" equivalent to the world as it exists outside our minds. Reality is the product of the imagination as it shapes the world. Because it is constantly changing as we attempt to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world, reality is an activity, not a static object. We approach reality with a piecemeal understanding, putting together parts of the world in an attempt to make it seem coherent. To make sense of the world is to construct a worldview through an active exercise of the imagination. This is no dry, philosophical activity, but a passionate engagement in finding order and meaning. Thus Stevens would write in "[The Idea of Order at Key West](#)",

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

In his book *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens writes, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."^[60] But as the poet attempts to find a fiction to replace the lost gods, he immediately encounters a problem: a direct knowledge of reality is not possible.

Stevens suggests that we live in the tension between the shapes we take as the world acts upon us and the ideas of order that our imagination imposes upon the world. The world influences us in our most normal activities: "The dress of a woman of Lhassa, / In its place, / Is an invisible element of that place / Made visible."^[61] As Stevens says in his essay "Imagination as Value", "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them."

Supreme fiction

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction is a lyrical poetic work of three parts, containing 10 poems each, with a preface and epilogue opening and closing the entire work of three parts. It was first published in 1942 and represents a comprehensive attempt by Stevens to state his view of the art of writing poetry. Stevens studied the art of poetic expression in many of his writings and poems including *The Necessary Angel* where he stated, "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have."^[63]

Throughout his poetic career, Stevens was concerned with the question of what to think about the world now that our old notions of religion no longer suffice. His solution might be summarized by the notion of a "Supreme Fiction", an idea that would serve to correct and improve old notions of religion along with old notions of the idea of God of which Stevens was critical.^[64] In this example from the satirical "[A High-Toned Old Christian Woman](#)", Stevens plays with the notions of immediately accessible, but ultimately unsatisfying, notions of reality:

Poetry is the supreme Fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms
Like windy citherns, hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
Madame, we are where we began.

The saxophones squiggle because, as [J. Hillis Miller](#) says of Stevens in his book, *Poets of Reality*, the theme of universal fluctuation is a constant theme throughout Stevens's poetry: "A great many of Stevens' poems show an object or group of objects in aimless oscillation or circling movement." In the end, reality remains.

The supreme fiction is that conceptualization of reality that seems to resonate in its rightness, so much so that it seems to have captured, if only for a moment, something actual and real.

I am the angel of reality,
seen for a moment standing in the door.

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash;

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appareled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?^[67]

In one of his last poems taken from his 1955 *Collected Poems*, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour", Stevens describes the experience of an idea which satisfies the imagination and he states this as being: "The world imagined is the ultimate good." Stevens places this thought in the individual human mind and writes of its compatibility with his own poetic interpretation of 'God' stating: "Within its vital boundary, in the mind,/ We say God and the imagination are one.../ How high that highest candle lights the dark."^[68]

Poetic criticism of old religion

Imaginative knowledge of the type described in "Final Soliloquy" necessarily exists within the mind, since it is an aspect of the imagination which can never attain a direct experience of reality.

We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

Stevens concludes that God and human imagination are closely identified, but that feeling of rightness which for so long a time existed with that old religious idea of God may be accessed again. This supreme fiction will be something equally central to our being, but contemporary to our lives, in a way that the old religious idea of God can never again be. But with the right idea, we may again find the same sort of solace that we once found in old religious ideas. "[Stevens] finds, too, a definite value in the complete contact with reality. Only, in fact, by this stark knowledge can he attain his own spiritual self that can resist the disintegrating forces of life ... Powerful force though the mind is ... it cannot find the absolutes. Heaven lies about the seeing man in his sensuous apprehension of the world ...; everything about him is part of the truth."

... Poetry
Exceeding music must take the place

Of empty heaven and its hymns,
Ourselves in poetry must take their place^[70]

In this way, Stevens's poems adopt attitudes that are corollaries to those earlier spiritual longings that persist in the unconscious currents of the imagination. "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea ... It satisfies / Belief in an immaculate beginning / And sends us, winged by an unconscious will, / To an immaculate end."^[71] The "first idea" is that essential reality that stands before all others, that essential truth; but since all knowledge is contingent on its time and place, that supreme fiction will surely be transitory. This is the necessary angel of subjective reality—a reality that must always be qualified—and as such, always misses the mark to some degree—always contains elements of unreality.

Miller summarizes Stevens's position:

Though this dissolving of the self is in one way the end of everything, in another way it is the happy liberation. There are only two entities left now that the gods are dead: man and nature, subject and object. Nature is the physical world, visible, audible, tangible, present to all the senses, and man is consciousness, the nothing which receives nature and transforms it into something unreal....

Influence of Nietzsche

Aspects of Stevens's thought and poetry draw from the writings of [Friedrich Nietzsche](#). Stevens' poem "Description without Place," for example, directly mentions the philosopher:

Nietzsche in Basel studied the deep pool
Of these discolorations, mastering
The moving and the moving of their forms
In the much-mottled motion of blank time.^[73]

Scholars have attempted to trace some of Nietzsche's influence on Stevens' thought in general. While Steven's intellectual relationship to Nietzsche's is complex, it is clear that Stevens shared the philosopher's perspective on topics such as religion, change, and the individual. Milton J. Bates notes that

...in a 1948 letter to Rodriguez Feo, [Stevens] expressed his autumnal mood with an allusion to Nietzsche: "How this oozing away hurts notwithstanding the pumpkins and the glaciale of frost and the onslaught of books and pictures and music and people. It is finished, Zarathustra says; and one goes to the Canoe Club and has a couple of Martinis and a pork chop and looks down the spaces of the river and participates in the disintegration, the decomposition, the rapt finale" (*L* 621). Whatever Nietzsche would have thought of the Canoe Club and its cuisine, he would have appreciated the rest of the letter, which excoriates a world in which the weak affect to be strong and the strong keep silence, in which group living has all but eliminated men of character.

Literary influence

From the first, critics and fellow poets praised Stevens. [Hart Crane](#) wrote to a friend in 1919, after reading some of the poems that would make up *Harmonium*, "There is a man whose work makes most of the rest of us quail."^[75] The [Poetry Foundation](#) states that "by the early 1950s Stevens was

regarded as one of America's greatest contemporary poets, an artist whose precise abstractions exerted substantial influence on other writers."^[76] Some critics, like [Randall Jarrell](#) and [Yvor Winters](#), praised Stevens' early work but were critical of his more abstract and philosophical later poems

[Harold Bloom](#), [Helen Vendler](#), and [Frank Kermode](#) are among the critics who have cemented Stevens's position in the [canon](#) as one of the key figures of 20th-century American Modernist poetry. **Bloom has called Stevens "a vital part of the American mythology" and unlike Winters and Jarrell, Bloom has cited Stevens's later poems, like "Poems of our Climate," as being among Stevens's best poems.**

In commenting on the place of Stevens among contemporary poets and previous poets, his biographer [Paul Mariani](#) stated, "Stevens's real circle of philosopher-poets included Pound and Eliot as well as Milton and the great romantics. By extension, [E. E. Cummings](#) was a mere shadow of a poet, while Blackmur (a contemporary critic and publisher) did not even deign to mention Williams, Moore, or Hart Crane."^[79]

In popular culture

In 1976, at [Atelier Crommelynck](#), [David Hockney](#) produced a portfolio of twenty etchings called *The Blue Guitar: Etchings By David Hockney Who Was Inspired By Wallace Stevens Who Was Inspired By Pablo Picasso*.^[80] The etchings refer to themes of a poem by Stevens, [The Man with the Blue Guitar](#). Petersburg Press published the portfolio in October 1977. In the same year Petersburg also published a book in which the poem's text accompanied the images.

Both titles of an early story by [John Crowley](#), first published in 1978 as "Where Spirits Gath Them Home", later collected in 1993 as "Her Bounty to the Dead", come from "[Sunday Morning](#)". The titles of two novels by D. E. Tingle, *Imperishable Bliss* (2009) and *A Chant of Paradise* (2014), come from "Sunday Morning". [John Irving](#) quotes Stevens's poem "[The Plot Against the Giant](#)" in his novel *The Hotel New Hampshire*. In Terrence Malick's film *Badlands*, the nicknames of the protagonists are Red and Kit, a possible reference to Stevens's poem, "Red Loves Kit".

[Nick Cave](#) cited the lines "And the waves, the waves were soldiers moving" in his song "We Call Upon the Author". They come from Stevens's poem "Dry Loaf". Later [Vic Chesnutt](#) recorded a song named "Wallace Stevens" on his album *North Star Deserter*. The song references Stevens's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird".]

["The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"](#)

Awards

During his lifetime, Stevens received numerous awards in recognition of his work, including:

- [Bollingen Prize](#) for Poetry (1949)
- [National Book Award for Poetry](#) (1951,^[83] 1955^[84]) for *The Auroras of Autumn*, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*
- [Frost Medal](#) (1951)

- [Pulitzer Prize for Poetry](#) (1955) for *Collected Poems*

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Acclaimed Poet's Hartford Home On The Market

KENNETH R. GOSSELIN

HARTFORD — For years, acclaimed poet Wallace Stevens walked from his home in [Hartford](#)'s West End to his job at a local insurance company, composing poems in his head on the way.

Now, the 1920s Colonial where Stevens' daily journeys began is on the market, with an asking price of **\$489,900**.

The 3,900-square-foot home on Westerly Terrace has six bedrooms and three bathrooms under a slate roof and is built on a half-acre in one of the city's most exclusive neighborhoods. The front entry foyer is ample, giving visitors a first look at stately wainscoting that is repeated throughout the three-story house.

But the home — owned by Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford since Stevens' death in 1955 — is a bit of a fixer-upper, with updates needed in the kitchen and bathrooms. None of the furniture that remains is vintage Stevens, but a biography of his life has been casually placed on an enclosed cast-iron radiator in a first-floor sitting room, a nod to the home's provenance.

The cathedral decided to sell the house — its brass door knocker is inscribed with the word "deanery" — because priests now prefer to buy and live in their own homes, said Leslie Jones, the cathedral's administrator.

Since the property was listed Sunday morning, there have been six showings and more have been scheduled, according to Paula Fahy Ostop, a real estate agent

with Ellyn Marshall & Associates/William Raveis in West Hartford, who has the listing.

The listing has caught the attention of The Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens, a group of poets and poetry lovers. A few years ago, the group created a tribute to Stevens, erecting 13 knee-high granite stones — each with a verse of Stevens' well-known poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" — along his walking route from home to office. One of the stones is on a grassy boulevard across the street from the house.

Jim Finnegan, the group's president, said Tuesday there has been some early discussion of perhaps raising money to buy the house and later possibly transferring ownership to a separate nonprofit foundation that would maintain it. The intent would be to preserve the floor plan as it was after Stevens' bought the house in 1932.

"We might find some Stevens memorabilia to put in there," Finnegan said. "It would be low-key, not a museum like the Twain House. It's not going to be anything like open 9-5 on Saturdays or anything like that."

He added: "It would just ensure that the house wouldn't be totally revamped inside and out."

One family member — a grandson of Wallace Stevens and his wife, Elsie — still has furnishings from the house, Finnegan said.

After purchasing 118 Westerly Terrace in 1932, Stevens made the house his lifelong home. In a letter shortly after moving in, Stevens wrote; "Without launching into a description of the house (which, I suppose, is very much like other houses), it is enough to say we are delighted with it, although a little short of furniture. However, we expect to be able to buy a sofa before Holly has any very pressing need of one."

Alison Johnson, author of "Wallace Stevens: A Dual Life as Poet and Insurance Executive," said the observation is an example of subtle humor not usually associated with Stevens.

"His daughter Holly was only 8 years old at that time," Johnson said, years from needing a sofa to sit with courting beaux.

The household had a tough time keeping domestic help because Elsie Stevens was difficult to please, Johnson said, noting that the couple's relationship was strained for much of the marriage.

Stevens washed the dishes after dinner and scrubbed the kitchen floor, Johnson said.

In a letter in 1943, Stevens wrote: "After all, one's best things are more than likely to come in the midst of floor scrubbing."

While often viewed as prickly and solitary, Stevens wasn't completely antisocial. In one essay by Steve Kemper, Stevens was reported to have walked to work at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co., now The Hartford, with Harry Tyler Smith, who worked at [Aetna](#).

Smith would whistle Wagner as the two men walked. But when the Aetna company bus passed by, and Smith's co-workers urged him to get in, they wouldn't invite Stevens.

Stevens was being praised as a "poet's poet" as early as the 1930s but he kept a low profile in Hartford, virtually unknown to his neighbors.

Once asked to repeat at the Wadsworth Atheneum a lecture he had given in New York in 1951 at the Museum of Modern Art, Stevens declined: "Sorry. In Hartford I'm known as a businessman."

Hartford began taking more notice of Stevens in the 1950s. One appreciation by Trinity College Assistant Professor Samuel F. Morse in 1954 noted that many things Stevens saw on his walks found their way into his poetry.

"Statues in parks, stone lions in front of buildings, the Connecticut River, forsythia in bloom against an early spring sky, chalk marks scrawled on the sidewalk," Morse wrote. "Anyone living in Hartford could recognize names and places in some of the poems..."

Stevens won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1955, just months before he died.

On Westerly Terrace, peonies still bloom in the garden behind the house, though it is anyone's guess whether they are the ones planted by the Stevenses. Inside, the kitchen clearly was updated in the 1980s, but the nearby butler's pantry still has the original cabinetry with glass-paneled doors.

"For someone with the means and the vision, this could be such an amazing home," Ostop said.

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Historic Wallace Stevens home in the West End. Classic 1926 colonial. Slate roof, grand entrance. Brand new furnace! 6 bedrooms, 3 full baths. Great potential. Huge master bedroom suite with sitting room and fireplace.

Facts and Features

Type

Single Family

Year Built

1926

Heating

Other

Cooling

No Data

Parking

1 space

Lot

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