Anthony Whitting: On "Disillusionment of Ten O' clock"

"? The disillusionment of the title refers in part to the poverty described in the first part of the poem. The middle-class American goes to bed at ten o'clock and haunts his own house by wearing a white nightgown. The title may also refer to [James MacNeill] Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" Lecture. Though Stevens' emphasis on color might recall poems such as [Oscar] Wilde's "Impression du Matin,"

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold

Changed to a harmony in grey:

A bare with ochre-colored hay

Dropped from the wharf,

the use of color in Stevens' poem does not seem intended to render a "mood" or "impression." Rather, the contemplation of colors in various combinations seems to be a pleasurable end in itself, and the poem appears to endorse the pure good of artifice and decoration ("socks of lace / And beaded ceintures") in a landscape that would otherwise be blank.

Stevens, though, is not giving another "Ten O'Clock" lecture in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock." In imagining the nightgowns these Americans might wear, Stevens is envisioning a meeting of art and life that is unaesthetic in emphasis. In the "Ten O'Clock" lecture Whistler says that he wants to lift the burden of art from the shoulders of the middle class:

The boundary line is clear. Far from me to propose to bridge it over ? that the pestered people be pushed across. No! I would save them from further fatigue. I would come to their relief and would lift from their shoulders this incubus of Art.

Why, after centuries of freedom from it, and indifference to it, should it now be thrust upon them by the blind ? until wearied and puzzled, they
know no longer how they shall eat or drink? how they shall sit or stand? or wherewithal they shall clothe themselves? without afflicting Art.

"Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock" does not seem to follow this separationist policy. It colorfully investigates how the middle class might "clothe" itself with art. The disillusionment of the title, then, refers not only to middle-class lack of illusion, but also to Stevens’ disillusionment with "Ten O’Clock” aestheticism.

Aesthete and middle-class burgher are used in "Disillusionment" to point to each other’s limitations. Both of these personae, however, are criticized from a third perspective, that of the old drunk sailor, a figure Stevens perhaps borrowed from Baudelaire, who writes in "Le Voyage" of "ce matelot ivrogne" [the "drunken sailor" who, in Baudelaire’s poem, also "invents Americas"]. The sailor’s dream life sets him apart from the burgher. As Milton Bates writes, "[T]he people who want to keep regular hours are unlikely to dream of baboons and periwinkles." And his tiger hunting is unlikely to appeal to the aesthetes. (Try to imagine [Huysmans’ notoriously decadent “hero”] Des Esseintes traveling to another continent to go on safari!)