



Poetry as a Way of Giving Life in Extreme Situations: A Study of Two Selected Poem by Wallace Steven

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Abstract

The function of poetry is to help people in many different ways to overcome the challenges when they seem to have lost their lives. However, the present paper aims at demonstrating how does imagination in Wallace Steven's(1879-1955) poetry offer skills and techniques which help understand better and cope with difficulties. However, two of Steven's poem are tackled in this paper: "Thirteen Ways of Looking At Black Bird" and " Disillusion of Ten O'clock". Furthermore, the paper deals with the poem from a new critic point of view. Accordingly, the study concludes that the poet's style of using imagery in many different ways is a modern way of coping with and understanding reality.

Key words: Steven, black bird, mountain, nightgown, sailor

الخلاصة:

وظيفة الشعر هي مساعدة الناس في العديد من الطرق المختلفة للتغلب على التحديات التي تؤدي الى الضياع او حتى فقدان حياتهم ، يهدف البحث الحالي إلى توضيح كيف يقوم الخيال في شعر والاس ستيفن (١٨٧٩-١٩٥٥) بتقديم المهارات والتقنيات التي تساعد على فهم أفضل والتعامل مع الصعوبات. يتناول البحث قصيدتان لستيفن: "ثلاث عشرة طريقة للنظر الى الطائر الأسود" و "وهم الساعة العاشرة". بالإضافة الى ذلك ، يتناول البحث القصيدتان من وجهة نظر النقد الجديد. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن أسلوب الشاعر في استخدام الصور الشعرية بعدة طرائق مختلفة هو طريقة حديثة للتعامل مع الواقع وفهمه .



I. Introduction

Steven is known for his use of both natural and cultural imageries. What stills not known is that Steven's way of imagination poetry makes people look at the real world in several different ways. This provides new ideas to overcome the obstacles and get skills and techniques which help understand better and cope with difficulties. However, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how creativity provides artfulness that help to better understand and cope with difficulties. In terms of methodology, the paper deals with two poems by Steven: "Thirteen Ways of Looking At Black Bird" and "Disillusion of Ten O'clock". Theoretically, however, the paper approaches Mathew Arnold's(1822-1888) ideas of new criticism. Finally, the paper concludes that Steven's philosophy is a modern therapeutic way of viewing at reality.

II. Literature Review

Many studies tackled Wallace Steven's poetry but the focus, here, will be on the power of imagination in his poetry. However, a study entitled "Dance of a Blackbird: Wallace Stevens' Notion of Supreme Nature: A Brief Analysis of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" attempts to reproduce the concept of supreme nature provided by Stevens from the deconstructivism viewpoint as material support, emotional inspiration, spiritual comfort, empirical sources and philosophical reflection on culture; in this fractured and chaotic universe, the great nature which culture has failed to provide finds sense and order. Another study, "The Absurd in Wallace Stevens' Poetry: A Method of Explicating Modern Poetry" explores the dualist perception of reality in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and it



concludes that reality is unknowable and must therefore be turned into a beautiful unreal. It is this conviction, seen as the foundation that gives Stevens his joy in using imagination as an agent or better creator of the life of Man. Another study, "The Duality of Wallace Stevens" deals with the dual strategy that Steven follows in his poetry. The study reaches the conclusion that Stevens' message of dichotomous equilibrium was informed by his life experiences. His personal philosophy often correlates consistently with every poetry and prose work in his literary career. However, the present study is different from the previous ones in that it deals with Steven's poems as a way to cope with critical situations in our life and the analysis of the poem comes from a new critic way of analysis.

III. New Criticism

The New Criticism method is, primarily, a close reading which focuses on formal aspects such as rhythm, meter, theme, imagery and metaphor. Equally important, new criticism underlines the inner characteristics of the text itself, and discourages the use of external evidence to justify the research. However, according to Arnold, poetry has the power to interpret life to us. He sees that poetry has the ability to explain life; whether we want to be consoled or to seek sustenance, we can also turn to it. Greatly damaged by the persuasiveness of religious explanations, poetry has the unique power to make sense of life, a sense from which we can draw comfort and strength. What is more-and here we see the idea of culture allows us to grow, become more complete and a better people(Bertens;2005:7). In a way, both schools of new criticism and practical criticism are the same theory of how the texts



are interpreted, but with their underlying values new critique goes a step further. New critics put great emphasis on the intrinsic importance of a text.

IV. Discussion

4.1 "Thirteen Ways of Looking At Black Bird"

"Thirteen Ways of Looking At Black Bird"(1917) deals with the ideas of the blackbird's depiction of death, nothingness, imagination and truth. Stevens' ideas about the self , the world, and the flux of attention that moves from one to the other might seem jumbled to the reader, but anyone who looks at this poem must be prepared to spend some time with it, grappling with the confused thoughts that come into his mind. The entire poem must be read, not a linear progression but from a more rationalistic point of view theological matters combined with strongly figurative imagery and surreal vocabulary, this distinctly modern rationalism obscures all but the metaphysical considerations of his poetry. "Poetry must almost successfully resist intelligence," (Wilde;1997:3).It is read as one of Stevens' most frequently-quoted aphorisms. His ethical interests grow from poetic answers to Philosophical, logical questions(Ibid:3).

The first section begins with a blackbird landscape. This section has a lot of introductory research to do as the first of the "Thirteen Ways of Looking At Blackbird." On the part of the viewer, it packs a remarkable amount of movement into three lines: like a lens, we zoom in from a massive panorama to a tiny focal point, from the unmoving immensity of the landscape to the animated specificities of animal life. There are a variety of contrasts operating here: **big** versus **small**, **twenty** versus **two**, **still** versus **going**, **inanimate** versus **animate**, **white** versus **black**. Subtly, the normal blackbird becomes a symbol of amazing power as a visual image, against twenty huge



mountains, the one tiny bird holds its own. It also stands out in the white landscape as a place of rich darkness, setting the blackbird's precedent as a dominant visual presence. The wording of this first stanza also allows us to connect with the blackbird's eye — or the blackbird's "I" if we indulge the homophone as readers or literary observers. This makes it particularly important for it to be "I". This makes it especially fitting for it to be section "I" — the blackbird's eye is our entrance into the poem, our first looking way, and it is vital that the first living thing to greet us is an eye that stares right back. This image reflectively focuses our attention on our own act of looking, and should allow us to examine how we see each picture the poem poses to us, and what new perspectives we take on in each chapter. Thus mitigating the normal connotations of the dark bird as death is the reality that we identify with the blackbird: rather, the blackbird is our lifeline in the scene being portrayed:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird (C.P.p,92).

The structure and order of the three lines also increases our reading's suspense: "the blackbird's eye" is the last word, the last thing our attention lands on. As the ends of lines one and three, the contrasting pair are balanced by **mountains** and **blackbird**. We are caught during the transition, line two, in the tension of wondering for the brief period of one line what is "the only moving thing?" The face of our imagination imitates the cinematic act of wandering the mountain vista, looking for this one place of movement for that brief pause. In a way, this first section serves as a training scheme for the reader's eye, preparing us for the next twelve "looking ways." The change

between objects in section I is perhaps the most dramatic eye exercise in the entire poem, but it should warn us not to let our guard down as viewers as we read the rest of the poem.

The world in general is at the moment going from the stage of fatalism to an indifferent stage. A stage where the primary meaning is a sense of helplessness. But because the universe is much more passionate than other people in it, what the universe looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new conviction (N. Serio; 2007: 3). This seems to be a representation of an oriental print using the scenery and the twenty snowy mountains surrounded by snow. But there is motion; the blackbird's eye is roaming across the scene. This stanza establishes the strong feeling that permeates the rest of the poem, the feeling of death and nothingness, and the conflict between imagination and truth that occurs in most of Stevens' poetry. Stevens claims that the world / reality divides the self / imagination. Separating induces dismay because the self can never know the real world, but it can also be a great pleasure. The narrator did not see the blackbird in Section II, but became aware of it. His consciousness has been tripled in this awareness. Blackbirds and tree are a totally different reality at this moment and independent of themselves:

I was of three minds⁶

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds (C.P. p.92).

Throughout Section III, the blackbird is juggled and jumbled in the mind of the author as thoughts of death, fantasy, and truth whirling in the air. This uncertainty comes with new concepts knowledge. The blackbird is part of life's pantomime:

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

It was a small part of the pantomime (C.P.p.92).

Section IV deals with the concept of becoming a principal and a woman by love and sexual activity. With the blackbird intruding on the relationship, this



romantic idea is dismissed in the next section. Death, truth and creativity with the individual will always be present and cannot be removed:

A man and a woman
Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird (C.P.p.92).

Section V is an example of the perceiving / perceived concept of Stevens. The narrator says he does not know what to choose, blackbird's whistling or just after, the inflections or innuendos. Stevens says the reader cannot hear the blackbird's actual whistle. All one hears is the noise after reaching the ear and being transmitted to the brain where it is converted into sound patterns that the mind hears. The blackbird whistling is the truth and the "just after" is our whistling perception. The "just after" also indicates silence. The quiet continues after the blackbird has spoken. This can be perceived as death or in contrast to the blackbird's sound as another reality. The speaker is still uncertain as to what is the ultimate imagination or reality. Section VI has the blackbird's shadow on an ice-coated glass crossing back and forth. In the above chapters, the author looks hazily at the ideas portrayed by the blackbird, but in his mind the ideas remain vague. The shadow evokes an atmosphere of death and an understandable reality. He cannot see clearly in other areas as he will. Throughout section VII, the speaker talks to the "thin men of Haddam."-- Haddam is a city in the county of Middlesex, Connecticut, United States-- By seeing and using nothing but their imagination, he speaks against the people trying to ignore the blackbird. We are trying to ignore information about things and ideas we do not want to learn about. Throughout Section VIII, this concept is expanded and updated. The narrator knows the same things as Haddam's guys, but he is not like them thin. He understands that the blackbird is interested in everything he knows,

death and life. Now the speaker is more able to accept the blackbird and its thoughts:

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,

That the blackbird is involved (C.P.p.93).

In what is known the blackbird in Section IX flew out of control, but the flight crosses other people's circles whether or not they know it. The other circles are the consciousness level of the author. The blackbird now permeates them at all points and becomes part of the mind of the author. Section X shows the "euphony bows," the people seeking comfort in day-to-day life avoiding unpleasant things. We scream out at the sight of a blackbird that isn't even black, but tinted green with a green light, because they want nothing to disturb their world, even the blackbird's natural world. We prefer not to think at all. Section XI may be regarded as the poem's climax. The blackbird and the winds in Section III, both symbols of the natural world, were the only moving thing throughout the poem. Now the protagonist is flying through Connecticut, driving a bus. He thought for a moment that the coach's shadow might be a blackbird, but that's just a momentary terror. The coach is glass, so he'll cast no shadow, but his own. Now he's the same as the blackbird. He took the blackbird. The idea goes on in Section XII:

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him:
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds(C.P.p,93).

The river runs, and the blackbird by extension flies. The natural world is portrayed by both river and blackbird. The speaker reaffirms and is pleased with his recognition of the blackbird. Fear of death or truth is no longer present. Section XIII refers back to Section I. Except for this time the protagonist sees the blackbird, there is the same snowy landscape. "It was snowing / and it was going to snow." is another Section XII restatement. The speaker knows the blackbird is there and will be there even after it's gone:



It was evening all afternoon.

It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

The blackbird sat

In the cedar-limbs(C.P.p.94).

These last two stanzas make a strange pair, but it is important to put them together as the last two parts of the poem. We are two different endings by one possible interpretation. Our thinking works in this way that Roaming blackbirds continues through the implacable cycle of nature, or sits in a tree, awaiting the day end. The former alternative, stanza XII, both focuses on time and social rationalization. The regular transition in the poem which had been living This stanza points in ice and snow for its whole to the coming of spring. That defrost indicated by "the river is rising." The blackbird on the move begins the cyclic Flying from part III, its small portion in nature's magic show, and the poem indicates that nature's cycles should continue forever towards the future, providing infinite possibilities for learning, seeing and interacting with the blackbird In various new forms. In a different way, These lines is a way out of the endless winter of the poem, yet, it is a hope of a beginning of a fresh period and set of looks. That comfortably affirms nature's consistency and predictability. The argument is revealed very clearly as a double-part bare-bone equation if (A), then (B). The two sections are not attempted to fuse four sentences in double rows. The syntax is precisely in parallel, at twofold ending with "-ing". Its self-confidence straightforward declaration gives it a feeling of an appellation — This one has the appearance of absolute truth —these lines of verse often indirectly ask. This argument itself is at best tenuous: the river's flow has no apparent connection or trigger with the blackbird's flight. The Part is intended to streamline blackbirds placing it in a mental sense that is glossing over the ambiguity that the blackbird has consumed in the poem. If the cycle of seasons, the blackbird's flight, and the observer's look are to continue, this will not occur within the context of the poem.

Stanza XII offers an outward view of the regeneration of the "Thirteen Ways to Look at a Blackbird" world; just as quickly the final section XIII returns to explanations of winter, loneliness, and closure. This stanza closes



the textual circle of the poem, rather than continuing the broader life cycle by going back to a winter image that reminds of stanza I. But Functions have now shifted as the snow begins to fall, the landscape itself is shifting and the blackbird is the only one that does not move. The sound of finality is established by many distinctly exquisite lines: "Every afternoon at night" summarizes a winter day by suggesting the coming of darkness. "It was snowing / And it was going to snow," we're frozen right before sunset for the duration of this image as we realize that the end of the day is close. Once again, the verb "to be" holds considerable weight: the triple use of "was" is as plain as it is utterly final. The inverse of the wandering eye in first stanza, which acted as the reader's device in the poem's "looking" cycle, our attention finally settles on the blackbird in the last couplet, now anchor of tranquility, sitting and waiting for the imminent night. What we interpret this ending is heavily dependent upon the meanings over the course of the poem we gave blackbird. In this final choice of interpretation, the various viewpoints of the positions converge.

Stanza thirteen is one of calmness or despair. Under the most constructive and practical setting. In this the stanza, there is a quiet scene that strengthens our connection with blackbird and existence in its entirety. we are one with the bird near the poem ending When we have learned one thing from the poem, then the blackbird will mean a lot to many people and we can choose to find meaning inside it. The inevitability of snowfall and evening is in that view the appearance of our own sunset. The blackbird will passively watch at the end of time, as the planet gathers us into its cold soil. The black bird perched in the trees the evoke vultures, or Satan perched on the Paradise Lost Tree of Life in the form of a cormorant, watching the scene of the collapse of Man. Death is the mystery that lurked beneath the surface of the poem, in the shadows that scared us briefly. Those two meanings, however, may not be so contradictory. Steven repeatedly refers to our capacity to rationalize the signs of nature will always be limited but that we can still view life in as many different ways as possible as a near-infinite set of perspectives.

4.2 " Disillusion of Ten O'clock"



Wallace Stevens " Disillusion of Ten O'clock" was published in 1915 and was published in Stevens' first poetry book, Harmonium. The poem investigates colorfully how art could clothe itself to the middle class. The title's disillusionment, then, applies not only to the absence of belief in the middle class, but also to Stevens' disillusionment with aestheticism (Whitting;1996:83) ."Ten O'Clock." Stevens chose the free verse to form this piece. This means there is no rhyme or rhythm pattern. His decision was not made lightly, it makes sense that as it deals with the involvement of imagination, this text would be without restriction. The poem is an effort to objectively examine the lives of most people in society who never really enjoy life openly and sincerely. The poem starts with the speaker saying that he can see a variety of buildings "hunted / by white night-gowns." These houses ' inhabitants, whether they make up a street or a town, are dull. We all wear to bed the same thing. Their stand of clothes is a broader symbol for their state of life. They are seen by the speaker as working where they live near their full potential. The repetition of colors is one of the first things a reader can note about this work. Used to improve one's life's metaphorical "white night-gown." All four-six lines start and finish in the same way. Comparison with ghosts wearing white night-gowns represents the adherence of society to certain living standards. Deadliness and monotony in the lives of people give an idea of how traditional the people inside are. Many people in society's flat and boring life is the focus of this poem. Many people have been trying to draw on the boring and pointless lives of the author. The entire set-up of the houses depicted in this poem is such that it produces an impression of people's emptiness and simplicity in society.' White night haunted –gowns' is to project in the houses a ghostly image of the residents. It only indicates that, just like ghosts, the people living in the houses are cold and empty inside. The same garb worn by all the inhabitants is to say that their hollowness and boringness make the world very much alike:

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green
Or purple with green rings
Or green with yellow rings



Or yellow with blue rings(C.P.p.66).

The speaker begins in the first two lines with a strange comparison referring to "white night-gowns" with the difficulties of a certain group of men. He sees these gowns as the plainest, simplest items one might wear. Everybody wears them in the case of the particular place he's thinking about. They are so pervasive that their existence seems to haunt the "yards." It is clear that the speaker passes a negative judgement on the wearers of the night-gown because hauntings are not usually considered optimistic. He is worried about their lack of imagination. He goes on to mention a number of colors that aren't evening gowns. The speaker expresses his regret that none of the night-gowns are "blue." This diversity can take many forms, but most likely he wants people to be different. They either care what they're wearing, or how they're acting. If this improvement had been made, his life would be more exciting and he feels theirs:

None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinklesC.P.p.66).

The speaker proceeds to highlight the "strange[ness]" that he is finding. In the nightgowns, he is unable to find it and is frustrated by the reality. If he had his way, everybody would wear stuff like "silk socks" and "beaded walls," or belts. Such goods would boost his public image and he says he 'd be improving his own lives. Not having interesting dreams is one of the poor outcomes of living such dull lives. Sadly, for the night-gown wearers, they won't "dream of baboons and periwinkles," or little flowers. The speaker does not offer a reason as to why he is interested in these two pictures, adding to the intrigue of the poem. Maybe Stevens had hoped his reader would inspire more thinking:

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers

In red weather(C.P.p.66).

There are a few interesting people among all the duplicate lives in the area. They are old drunk sailors. Compared to the rest of the population, their lives are unorthodox, particularly given that they are "sleeping in [their] shoes" . They do not stick to the decorum norms that seem to draw us. There is another discrepancy between the sailors and the wearers at night. When a sailor dreams he's "catching tigers / in red. This picture is meant to be more fun than it is frightening. The sailor should experience an adrenaline rush at least in his dreams. He is having a much more enjoyable time than the rest of the guests.

V. Conclusion

The very essence of Steven's "Thirteen Ways of Looking At Black Bird" lies in its creative use of imageries. It is a modern way of looking at reality. This creativity reflects our focus on our own looks, which will allow us to analyze how we see each picture that the poem poses to us and what new perspectives we take in each stanza. And mitigating the dark bird's usual connotations as death is the fact we associate with the blackbird: then, the blackbird is our lifeline in the scene that is depicted. The face of our imagination imitates the cinematic act of roaming the view of the mountains, searching this one place of motion for this brief pause .The change between objects in section such as can be the most dramatic eye exercise such as big versus small, twenty versus two, still versus going, inanimate versus animate, white versus black. However, in "Disillusion of Ten O'clock" Steven conveys an idea that one of the poor results of living such dull lives is not having interesting dreams. The speaker does not provide a reason why he is interested in these two photos, adding to the poem's suspense which means that Stevens had hoped his reader could inspire more thoughts.

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