The Idea of Order at Key West Study Guide

The Idea of Order at Key West by Wallace Stevens

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Contents

Introduction

Written in 1934, "The Idea of Order at Key West" remains one of the most difficult poels by one ofAmerica's most difficult poets. Yet, it stands as one of Stevens' most anthologized poems, and according to most critics of his work, it is one of his best. Stevens must have liked it as well, as he made it the title poem in his 1936 collection, *Ideas of Order.* As widely praised as the poem is, no authoritative reading has emerged. Indeed, there are as many different interpretations of the poem as there are readers of it.

One of the great ironies of "The Idea of Order atKey West," is that for a complex poem, its plot is rather simple. An unnamed speaker is walking along thebeach of Key West and hears a woman singing a song. The song enchants the listener/speaker, and as the woman is singing, he begins to muse on the beauty of her song and its relationship to his own life, particularly his ideas on reality and imagination. Finally, after listening and thinking, the speaker experiences a kind of epiphany, a moment of insight. While few would question these basic facts of the poem, the debate takes place around what Stevens thinks of the song and what kind of epiphany he experiences.

While the poem remains too complex to be easily explicated or paraphrased here, it is accurate to say that the poem dramatizes important conflicts for Stevens: imagination and reality, presence and absence, order and chaos, nature and civilization, the mind and the body. While readers never see the female singer or actually hear what it is the woman is singing, they experience what the speaker of the poem experiences: transformation. The woman's song transforms the speaker's experience of walking along the beach, and, what's more, when he returns to town, he discovers that his perception ofKey West has also been altered. Early critics cite the poem as an example of Stevens championing the creative process, but that is inaccurate, according to most recent criticism. These critics believe that the poem is about the need for poetry and the need for art. Thus, the emphasis of the poem is not so much on the song itself but what the song does to the listener. One can extend that, of course, to Stevens' hope for his own poetry□that it has the same effect on his readers as the song does on the speaker of the poem.

Author Biography

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879, inReading, Pennsylvania, where he grew up in a typical upper-middle-class family in the American Northeast. In 1897, he enrolled at Harvard as a special student where he began writing poems seriously for the first time. He claims that, while at Harvard, he longed to be like John Keats, the famous British poet, immersed in the beauty of literature and literary pursuits. But Stevens was always pulled in multiple directions, and he was not convinced that a life devoted to literature would be an entirely masculine endeavor, nor a lucrative one.

AsAmerica was transforming into an industrial and financial powerhouse, ideas about men's roles in the world and productive professions were changing. With this in mind, upon graduation from Harvard in 1900, Stevens moved to New York to become a journalist. He believed that journalism offered the best chance for one's writing to have a direct impact on people's lives. For almost two years, he worked as a reporter for the *New York Tribune* and as an assistant editor for *World's Work.* However, Stevens and journalism were not a particularly good match, so Stevens decided to go to law school. He attendedNew York Law School and graduated on June 10, 1903. In 1904, he was admitted to theNew York State bar and began his career as an attorney, a job he would keep his entire life.

The year 1904 was a big year for Stevens for other reasons, as well. While at home on a visit, he met Elsie Viola Moll, the woman who would become his wife five years later. Between 1904 and 1907, Stevens worked for various law firms inNew York City and dabbled in poetry. In 1908, he joined the legal staff of the American Bonding Company and wrote a small sentimental book of poems, bearing the very un-Stevens-like title of *A Book of Verses.* He not only gave the book to Elsie, it was written for her. In 1909, he wrote another book for Elsie, this time entitled *The Little June Book.* Though none of these poems reflect the kind of work Stevens would be known for, he was on his way to becoming a major poet.

In 1914, at the age of thirty-four, Stevens began publishing what scholars consider his first mature poems, but his first book, *Harmonium,* did not appear until 1923. Though *Harmonium* did not sell well, it stands as perhaps the most important first book of poems by any twentieth-century American poet. But, with the birth of his daughter Holly in 1924, Stevens stopped writing and did not publish another book until 1935, when *Ideas of Order* appeared in a limited edition by Alcestis Press and then in full release in 1935, published by Alfred A. Knopf. From this point on, Stevens was very prolific. *The Man with the Blue Guitar* hit the stands in 1937 and *Parts of a World* and the long poem "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" appeared in 1942. Several more volumes followed: *Transport to Summer* in 1947; *The Auroras of Autumn* in

1950; *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* in 1951; *The Collected Poems* in 1954; and *Opus Posthumous,* edited by Holly Stevens, was published in 1957, two years after Stevens died of stomach cancer.

Stevens' awards were numerous, though fairly late in coming. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1945 and won the very prestigious Bollingen Prize in poetry in 1949. *The Auroras of Autumn* garnered the National Book Award for poetry in 1950, and in 1951, he received the Gold Medal of the Poetry Society of America. Stevens' *Collected Poems* won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1954. Stevens died of cancer on August 2,1955, inHartford, Connecticut.

In 2000, a panel of scholars of poets assembled by National Public Radio voted his poem "The Snow Man" one of the ten best American poems of the century, and most scholars agree that Stevens was probably the most important and most influential American poet of the twentieth century.

Poem Text

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

The water never formed to mind or voice,

Like a body wholly body, fluttering

Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion

Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,

That was not ours although we understood,

Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.

The song and water were not medleyed sound

Even if what she sang was what she heard,

Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

It may be that in all her phrases stirred

The grinding water and the gasping wind;

But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.

The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea

Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew

It was the spirit that we sought and knew

That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea

That rose, or even colored by many waves;

If it was only the outer voice of sky

And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.
It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then
we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.
Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,

As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
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.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-7

The opening stanza of the poem, along with the title, help set the stage for the action that transpires in the poem itself. Right away, Stevens distinguishes between the mind and external reality and also the singer and the sea, but as is always the case for Stevens, these divisions are never hard and fast. Readers do know a few things, though. There is a singer, who is a female. There is a speaker and also a companion, probably Ramon Fernandez of stanza six. They are all walking along the sea. Of all these agents, the agent receiving the primary attention is the female singer. The poem opens with a rather remarkable claim that she sings "beyond the genius of the sea." But Stevens describes the sea as a "wholly body" that both makes "a constant cry" and causes a constant cry. The syntax of this stanza is confusing because so many phrases may modify each other. The result of this lack of distinction is a sense of merging, a theme Stevens will develop throughout the poem. It's difficult to tell what belongs to what. What does emerge, though, is a sense that the cry takes on an inhuman significance, that it becomes an inspiring or even spiritual force that unites sea, land, speaker, and singer. The speaker of the poem may not comprehend exactly what's going on, but some sort of larger, spiritual understanding of the whole of experience is taking place.

Lines 8-14

Stevens is quick to point out in the second stanza that the sea "was not a mask," which is to say that the sea is not a static, external reality, just as the speaker is not a static, false, object. Both are in flux. They are not facades but wholly pulsing bodies. Stevens goes on to say in line ten that the cry of the sea is what the woman hears and translates into her own song. This cry, uttered by the sea, resembles the cry the young Walt Whitman experiences in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," in that the cry of the ocean becomes the song of the poet or in this case the song of the singer. In this moment, the inhuman song of the sea fuses with the utterly human song of the woman. By uttering the song "word by word," she makes the inhuman human. What's more, the poet suggests that the woman's beautiful words actually stir the waters and the wind. However, even if this is the case, the poet reminds readers that his attention has been transferred from the sea to the woman, for it is "she and not the sea" that he hears. This is an important move for Stevens because he seems to embrace a decidedly human gesture over a gesture of nature. While this may seem a simple act, it reverses the trend of romanticism to embrace nature over people. Stevens implicit message here is that poetry remains an utterly human endeavor.

Lines 15-20

In this stanza, Stevens establishes the primacy of the individual by asserting that even though she may have gotten the idea or the source of her song from the sea, the song ultimately issues from her alone. It is her song, just as the poem is Stevens' poem. He will soften his stance on the individuality of poetic creation over the course of his career, but in his early poems, Stevens is profoundly interested in the power of the imagination. Thus, where in stanzas one and two the singer and the sea seemed a joined pair, by stanza three, the sea is merely a backdrop for her song. But even after all of this has been cleared up, a nagging question remains: "Whose spirit is this?" Is it hers? Is it the sea's? Is it the spirit of the poet observing these forces? The moment is so strong that the poet and his companion know that they must keep asking themselves, whose spirit is driving this glorious song? Stevens seems to suggest that to answer this question is to get a glimpse into the mysteries of the hazy borders between imagination and reality. In a later poem, Stevens claims that the search for reality is as important as the search for God; perhaps he is implying here that if he can discern whose spirit is animating the woman and the sea, he can begin to know not only the mysteries of human imagination and perception but also the mysteries of God as well.

Lines 21-28

Readers expecting an answer to the question posed in the previous stanza get a big disappointment in stanza four. As is the case with every question Stevens poses, there is no clear answer. The speaker wonders if the song he is hearing is "only the dark voice of the sea." And he muses if the song is nothing more than the "outer voice of sky / And cloud." In other words, he goes back over everything that has happened. This kind of reflection into the revelatory powers of nature recalls the romantic poetry of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelly, and John Keats. In poems like Shelly's "Ode to the West Wind," Keats' "To Autumn," and especially Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," the speaker enjoys a spiritual renewal through a unity with nature. Nature not only puts the poet in touch with the sublime, it also serves as a creative vehicle for his poem. Thus, nature serves as a kind of god in that it delivers salvation on a number of levels. Through these questions, Stevens wonders if what he is experiencing is a similar kind of conflation with the sublime. In short, he wonders if he is lucky enough to be experiencing a romantic epiphany that his poetic forefathers so passionately sought, one that seems entirely out of reach in twentieth-centuryAmerica.

Lines 28-33

For the modern poet, nature cannot provide the kind of spiritual fulfillment it did for his nineteenth-century predecessors. He needs more. Readers know from the previous stanzas that what the speaker hears is not merely the sea singing through the woman's voice, nor is the woman the singular force that makes her song. Thus, when in line 28, he claims that the song is "more than that," he has come to understand that the song is more than sea, more than woman, more, even, than the trinity of woman, sea, and

speaker. What, exactly, the song is remains a mystery; all he knows is that the song and the spirit driving it are beyond the totality of the external realities in his presence. This realization is a good example of ineffability in Stevens. The ineffable□the unsayable, that which is beyond language and experience□remains a constant motif for Stevens throughout his work. He may not know what the source or the design of the song is, but he knows it is greater than the "meaningless plungings of water and the wind," which means that its power is greater than natural forces. In fact, it is greater than language, greater, perhaps, than human understanding, though only possibly understood by humans who can only articulate their experiences through language.

Lines 34-38

It is language, voice, that finally brings the speaker into understanding. At first glance, these lines may appear to be a reworking of the solipsism□a theory that holds that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing□of an earlier poem "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," in which Hoon imposes a kind of imperial order on the world around him. But a closer inspection reveals that what Stevens emphasizes here is not the imposition of order or the transformation of the world through perception (a rather selfish and impersonal process) but rather a celebration of the speaker's need to interpret the world around her and to articulate how she perceives this world. For Stevens, the acts of interpretation and articulation are fundamentally human acts that put people in touch with themselves and the world in which they walk and sing and dream and think. Again, Stevens wants to make a connection between the song in the poem and poetry itself. The importance of poetry lies not in the poet or even the poem but in the reader□what the reader learns about herself through an engagement with the poem.

Lines 38-43

In what remains one of the most impressive moments in modern poetry, Stevens offers a glimpse of the power of poetic engagement. In his *Adagia,* a collection of adages and aphorisms, Stevens writes, "Poetry is not the same things as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions." What Stevens means by this is that nothing is experienced alone. Really, there is no singularity. Everything stands in relation to everything else. People are all connected. This theory gets dramatized wonderfully in these six lines. The singer, the sea, and the observers all merge into one shared experience. What seemed to be autonomous, individual units in the first stanzas, becomes one shared unit by the end of this stanza. Stevens finally understands that he is not the sole maker of his reality, for his reality has been shaped by his engagement with the sea, the woman, and her song. The speaker realizes that the woman's song sharpens his perspective on the world around him and the world at large, just as a poem might do to a reader. Additionally, the song engenders in him a desire to create his own song, so that he can interact with the imagination of others the way the woman has corresponded with his. The poetic project does not exist in the private world of the singer or poet but in the public lives of other people.

Lines 44-51

To other people, the speaker turns. In an unusual poetic move for Stevens, the individual steps outside of his private meditative world and addresses another person, probably his companion on the beach, Ramon Fernandez. These lines represent a shift away from the solipsism of Hoon to a perspective shared by Ramon Fernandez and the town toward which they turn and move. Before, the song caused him to turn inward, away from nature, away from the town, but now, through the unifying power of the song (and poetry in general), the speaker turns back toward both nature and civilization with a new perspective. He re-sees the sea and his relationship to the sea. Again, he poses a question that goes unanswered. He wants to know why, after the singing ended, the lights of the boats and the town began "arranging" and "deepening" and "enchanting" the night.

While Ramon is either unable, or does not choose, to answer, the answer lies in the poem itself. He turns toward songs of humanity because the song redirected him toward human emotions, human endeavors, and human feelings. Also implied in this question is, again, the presence of something larger than the song, some spirit or force that makes human experiences more profound. Of course, a hard and fast answer will never come, but the speaker and Stevens know that the great joy and energy of being alive come from asking these very questions.

Lines 52-56

Stevens is always obsessed with words. In this final stanza, Stevens finally gets at the title of the poem by linking the desire for ordered experience with the ability to articulate experience. The "rage for order" concerns both "ourselves" and "our origins" and thus extends to the speaker, the singer, and the audience of the poem. It is important to realize that the poem is not attempting to order the readers' worlds or urging them to order the worlds of others. Rather, the song in the poem and the poem itself serve as articulations of how to begin to achieve some sort of understanding of a world that people do not understand. Or, put more philosophically, the poem dramatizes how people make the inhuman human. The "fragrant portals," then, represent openings for people, rich, rewarding passageways into places of self-location, self-awareness, and self-reflection. The song and the poem are such portals. After experiencing both, the words people utter to themselves at moments of insight and understanding will be "keener." And even though their world may contain gray areas, or "ghostlier demarcations," people might be able to access the larger spirit that is both human and inhuman, sayable and ineffable, ordered and chaotic. One of Stevens' most sensitive and passionate readers, Harold Bloom, in his book *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate,* argues that the poem affirms a "transcendental poetic spirit yet cannot locate it." To locate that spirit would be to order the world. To leave that location up to the reader is to invite the reader into Stevens' intoxicating song.

Themes

Reality and the Imagination

Late in his career, in fact, a year before his death, Stevens was asked to define the major theme of his poetry. As quoted by Lucy Beckett in *Wallace Stevens,* Stevens wrote that there "are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination" but that these poems were marginal to the central theme of a supreme fiction. "The Idea of Order atKey West" explores both of these themes, though more explicitly it serves as a stage for the tension between human imagination and human realities. The questions the speaker asks get at the heart of this dialectic: Is the song and its power only an external reality? Or does the power of the song lie in one's ability to transform it into something personal?

In his poem, "

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens writes, "I do not know which to prefer, 'the blackbird whistling / Or just after.'" In this poem, as in "Key West," Stevens is torn between actually hearing the songs and remembering and replying to them in his head. Finally, as Stevens suggests in the poem, one can never wholly embrace one over the other, as the imagined world is bound by the real one. The woman's song is a combination of both song and sea, and one's enjoyment of it derives out of a fusion of personal reflection and external apprehension. The poet, like the reader, must not privilege exclusively personal or public gestures but must engage both. The final stanzas of the poem offer a remedy for what Stevens calls his "reality-imagination complex" embrace and journey into both, and you will be rewarded.

Presence and Absence

Just as Stevens is torn between the pleasures of the imagination and the pleasures of reality, so is he torn between themes of presence and absence. Not surprisingly, the two sets of themes are connected, as reality suggests a palpable presence, whereas imagination suggests an external absence. In "Key West," the female singer is both present and absent. Readers never see her. They don't even know if the poet sees her. They do not get any description of her and don't know where she is. In fact, she could be entirely illusory. However, even though she is technically absent from the poem and from the landscape in the poem, she exerts a powerful presence on the speaker and on readers through her song. Thus, while her physical body may be absent, her non-physical voice is present.

As in the quote from "

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" mentioned above, Stevens remains attuned to the presence and absence of songs and voices. One cannot see or touch a voice, but

one experiences it. Hence, a song embodies both presence and absence, as does imagination.

Just as the song suggests an interest in presence and absence, so does Stevens' search for the spirit in the poem. Both the speaker and Ramon Fernandez know that some larger, transcendent spirit is moving among them and the singer, but they can't find it, can't name it, and can't affirm it. It is present yet absent. The reality that absence can become a penetrating presence becomes a major theme for Stevens and other modern writers because it reflects larger cultural and spiritual issues of the West in the early twentieth century. The search for God, meaning, symmetry, and purpose remain present but always elusive, like the song and the spirit in Stevens' poem.

Poetry

Like most of Stevens' poems,"Key West" may be about any number of other things, but it is also about poetry. Most of Stevens' poems have to do with poetry, and, in fact, almost all of them explore the writing experience or the experience of reading and perceiving poetry. Without question, "The Idea of Order atKey West" is a sort of allegory, that is, it functions as a microcosm of a larger situation. In this case, the situation, or macrocosm, is Stevens and his work. Imagine Stevens as the female singer, her song as one of his poems, and the speaker of the poem (the listener) as the readers. In this scenario, readers become transfixed by his poetry. It moves them like nothing else and causes them to see the world in an entirely different light. If it is successful, it turns them away from the singer (Stevens) and even the song (the poem) and directs their attention toward their own reaction to reading the poem and thinking about how it affects them. In an ideal world, the poem will engender a kind of relation between Stevens, the world, his poem, and the readers. Indeed, in one of his final and best poems, "The Planet on the Table," Stevens says of his work that "his poems, although makings of his self, / Were no less makings of the sun." This means that the poem is the product of the relationship between the poet and the planet of which he, his poem, and readers are part.

Additionally, it should be noted that for Stevens, poetry is not merely, lines, symbols, rhymes, and words but a metaphor for perception and connection. For him, poetry connotes engagement; poetry is the supreme example of human interaction. Thus, poetry provides fulfillment, understanding, awareness, beauty, and relation. So, his poems about poetry are also about what poetry can do for its readers.

Style

"The Idea of Order atKey West" is written in both formal and free verse. It is a meditative poem, written in a relaxed iambic pentameter. This means that while most of the lines adhere to traditional formal patterns, some do not. For instance, the basic metrical pattern of the poem is iambic, meaning that each unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one. Because this pattern resembles English speech most precisely, it is a common metrical device. Pentameter is a form of measure or feet, denoting five stresses per line. Iambic pentameter is the most common type of poetic form, and Stevens uses it brilliantly here. The regular limping rhythm he creates mimics the regularity of the rolling waves of the ocean. But like the ocean, Stevens' poem is not perfectly symmetrical. The lines do not possess a regular rhyming pattern, and they don't always conform to the demands of traditional verse. At times, his language transgresses these expectations, just as the woman's song extends "beyond the genius of the sea." To impose an older, more traditional order on the form of the poem would be at odds with the themes of the poem itself. So Stevens tweaks traditional expectations to achieve a poetic effect in concert with his thematics.

The poem's fifty-six lines are broken into stanzas of uneven length. But the stanza breaks do correspond to the argument the poem makes, so in this sense, the poem moves along at a discernable pace. However, while the stanza breaks may suggest logic and pattern, the irregular rhymes evoke an entirely different feeling. At first, the poem offers the reader some rhymes, but as the poem progresses and builds momentum, the rhymes disappear, like waves crashing into the beach and dissolving among the sand. Thus, the poem's structure embodies one of the poem's main themes: the marriage of order and chaos. The poem as a whole reflects one of the poem's motifs: the sea transcribed into words.

Historical Context

"The Idea of Order atKey West" was published in October 1934, in a group of eight poems. While there may have been a great deal of order in Hartford, Connecticut, where Stevens lived, there was a great deal of disorder in Key West, Florida, where Stevens was visiting in February of that year. There are two main reasons for this. First, the Great Depression was in full throttle at this point in American history. This was particularly difficult for poets, as there was no great honor attached to being a Depression Poet like there was for being a War Poet just a few years earlier during World War I.

Additionally, it was hard enough to earn a living at a regular job during the depression, much less as a poet. Stevens was well aware of the effects that the Great Depression was having on his friends and his readers. By 1932, around twenty-five percent of Americans were out of work. People were losing their houses and their lives at alarming rates. Very few people had enough interest or money to buy books of poems. When Stevens was writing the poems in *Ideas of Order,* he was beginning to dabble in leftist politics and to sympathize with the sentiments of those less fortunate and more politically active than he. Though Stevens did not consider himself a political poet, he remained politically aware, and his poems, though obliquely, often serve as personal responses to public crises.

The second reason for disorder in Key West in 1934 was the presence of American battleships off the coast of Florida. In Cuba, a revolution was taking place, and Stevens seemed more attuned to the political unrest in the streets and harbors ofKey West than to the flora and fauna that he typically enjoyed. In a letter to his wife, he talks of little else but the presence of warships in the port and the throngs of military men in the streets ofKey West. In 1933, the Cuban economy was in bad shape, when a coup ensued, prompting the American ambassador to ask for theUnited States to intervene. President Roosevelt refused to send troops but did dispatch almost thirty warships to Florida to send a message toCuba. Though Stevens seems less interested in the political disorder in Cuba than in the sense of disorder the military is causing inKey West, he does evince in his letters and journal entries a sense of uneasiness at what is happening both locally and globally. Thus, his poem about order and disorder, beauty and chaos, presence and absence, holds not only personal but public and political connotations as well.

On a larger scale, though, this was a fertile era in American arts and letters. Painting, poetry, music, fiction, sculpture, dance, and film were experiencing wild innovations. Movements like dadaism, cubism, expressionism, stream of consciousness writing, imagism, and communism had changed art and artistic expression forever. All art was becoming political in that it was challenging traditional forms and traditional ideas of beauty and expression. Stevens wants to strike a balance in his poems between the avant-garde and the conventional, and "Key West" serves as a good example of his warring desires. Formally and thematically, Stevens wrestles with his desire to write a personally fulfilling poetry yet one that speaks to and for humanity at large. Though his

poem may seem more personal than political by today's standards, if one keeps in mind what was happening economically in America and politically in Cuba and in Florida, the poem acquires a heady and intriguing political and historical component.

Critical Overview

"The Idea of Order atKey West" is one of Stevens' better known poems and the most important poem in the collec tion *Ideas of Order.* Some critics think that this poem is one of Stevens' finest, and many cite it as among the best of his early poetry.

Early critics of the poem tended to praise what they considered a strong transforming imagination, reminiscent of the high romanticism of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley. One of Stevens' first major readers, Frank Kermode, in his book *Wallace Stevens,* claimed the poem "may stand as a great, perhaps belated, climax to a whole age of poetry that begins with Coleridge and Wordsworth; it celebrates the power of the mind over what they called 'a universe of death.'" Similarly, Lucy Beckett, in her book titled *Wallace Stevens,* argues that "the poem's marvelous conclusion, suggests in its triumphant but still calm cadences a glimpsed victory over poverty that could be the poet's or could be any man's." Like Kermode and Beckett, Alan Perlis, in *Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes,* praises the ability of the singer to transform the world into her own personal song, claiming the "intellectual aspect of the heroic act, the act of localizing nature in the mind, is forcefully expressed" in "The Idea of Order atKey West." These critics tended to equate the solitary nature of the singer as she appears in stanzas two and three with Stevens himself because their model for a strong poetic presence would choose order over disorder; however, in so doing, they miss the subtleties of the final stanzas.

More recent critics have suggested that "The Idea of Order atKey West" turns on questions of ambiguity and relation, themes that have emerged in the last ten years. These themes are also hallmarks of Stevens' work. For Joseph Carroll, in his book *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction,* "The Idea of Order at Key West" is an important poem because while the poem does not locate evidence of a transcendent spirit, the "spirit that is present first in song and in the sea and then in the glassy lights sheds its influence all around the men who are seeking it." For him, the poem achieves spiritual presence through absence. Robert Rehder takes this reading one step further by suggesting the "poet's function in this poem is to listen rather than create." Like Carroll, he sees the poem as ultimately about a desire for connection through the poetic act. Rehder ultimately claims that the poet's rage for order is "a rage that confers a blessing."

One of the very best readers of Stevens, James Longenbach, in his book *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things,* grounds his interpretation of the poem in its and Stevens' historical context. Drawing on Stevens' letters from Key West and his journal entries, Longenbach argues that Stevens did not see sailboats but battleships atKey West and that the rage for order described in the poem is a kind of poetic call for peace, and the poem itself is a realization of one's self in relation to others. For him, the "inexplicable magic of 'The Idea of Order at Key West' exists not in the private world of the solitary singer but in the fact that other human beings hear the song and feel its power over their minds."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rader has published widely in the field of twentieth-century American poetry and on Wallace Stevens in particular. In the following essay, he discusses Stevens' theme of desire and the power of poetry.

Wallace Stevens is a great poet because he is a poet of many themes. His poems interrogate the borders of reality and imagination, pose questions about presence and absence, dramatize the ongoing dialogue between the body and the mind, and search for a balance between intellect and emotion. Stevens desired both to write poems and reach a large number of people□two potentially mutually exclusive desires since few Americans read poetry. Desire is an important word for Stevens because the concept of desire may be his major theme. For Stevens, desire is the most human emotion. Everyone has desire. Everyone wants fame, love, fulfillment, closeness, happiness, good food, and a nice place to live. The list is endless. Thus, Stevens sees desire as the great universal connector. People are connected to each other through the fact that they all desire, and Stevens believes that poetry is the best art form for articulating and embodying that desire.

Since poetry and desire cannot be separated for Stevens, his poems about desire are almost always also about poetry or the power of poetry. Like Sappho, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth and many other great writers before him, Stevens tries to get at the emotional element of poetry by linking it with music and song. People tend to connect songs and music with emotions, and Stevens knows this. He also knows that poetry was originally read or sung to musical accompaniment, so he remains aware of the lyric poem's grounding in music. Stevens likes to bridge poetry and song because he sees this fusion as a kind of symbol for bridging human desire with human expression. Certainly in his first book, *Harmonium,* and in his later books, like *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock,* the poems pulse with the power and urgency of desire. But, in the early 1930s, as Stevens is writing the poems that would make up *Ideas of Order,* he seems to grow somewhat skeptical of poetry's ability to embody or fully represent desire.

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," a poem from *Harmonium,* Stevens writes that music means "desiring you," but in a different poem fourteen years later, he writes that "the waltz / Is no longer a mode of desire." Given the fact that Stevens likes to think of music as a metaphor for poetry, one might believe that Stevens feels his poetry has lost some spunk, that it cannot continue to carry the energy of human desire and emotion. However, Stevens does make a distinction between the waltz and music itself. Perhaps it is the "old music" (as he says) that cannot adequately express desire. Perhaps what Stevens is saying is that a new music is needed, a new poetry that connects human desire with actual humans. That is, he wants to write a poetry that puts human beings back in touch with their desire through language. This desire for connection seems to be a powerful theme at work in "The Idea of Order atKey West."

In his poem, "Ghosts As Cocoons," Stevens writes, "Where is sun and music and highest heaven's lust, / For which more than any words cries deeplier?" The cry is the vocalization of internal desire□the internal made external. Likewise, the new music is that which takes the internal movements of the old and transforms them into an inclusive, communal vision of the new. For Stevens, the great project of poetry is to transform private vision (the vision of the poet) into a public vision (the vision of his readers and the world around him). This is exactly what the female singer accomplishes in "The Idea of Order atKey West" and why this poem serves as a nice metaphor for his work as a whole. He wants his poetry to have the same effect on his readers that the woman's song has on the speaker of the poem.

Yet, the speaker remains separate from the shadowy singer in "The Idea of Order atKey West," and some reasons why that is might provide some insight into the transformation the speaker goes through in the poem. The gay waltz in the poem mentioned above goes unnamed. It could be any waltz, played anywhere. But "Idea of Order" is firmly located along the shores of Florida. This is important because the opening poem in *Ideas of Order* is not a welcoming but a farewell. Oddly enough, the first poem is entitled "Farewell to Florida." While few critics have noted the relationship of the two poems, there remains both explicitly and implicitly a fundamental affinity between them. The female singer in "The Idea of Order" exists as a detached, solitary figure. In the poem, she rather matter-of-factly distances herself from the person who is narrating the events. Such is the case in "Farewell to Florida," where the poet also remains distant from the female presence. But oddly enough for Stevens, opposites attract. The idea of distance makes the woman appealing. It is her detachment that seduces Stevens because it gives him perspective.

Again, desire and seduction remain key themes for Stevens because of his own desire for his poems to seduce his readers. But he knows that to do this, his poems must be attractive on an emotional level. People must be able to feel his poems. But, like most men of Stevens' era, he is uncomfortable with intimate emotions; thus his poetry is a constant struggle between the intellect and emotion. This conflict is the subject of "Farewell to Florida." The text of "Farewell to Florida" tells of a relieved Stevens who longs to return to his ordered northern (male) state of mind, but the subtext reveals something entirely different:

From my North of cold whistled in a sepulchral

South,

Her South of pine and coral and coraline sea, Her home, not mine, in the ever-freshened Keys, Her days, her oceanic nights, calling

Often Stevens associates the muse (the Greek goddesses who were in charge of inspiring poets and composers) with the tropics of Florida. Stevens is also seduced in "The Idea of Order atKey West" but not by the lushness of the woman, rather by her song. In both instances, Stevens' desire takes on a sort of rage, the likes of which readers do not find in *Harmonium.* The famous literary critic Harold Bloom, in his book

Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate, claims that this "is so erotic a stanza that the reader needs to keep reminding himself that this Florida, as a state of mind, is a trope of pathos, a synecdoche for desire and not desire itself." True indeed, the passage is beautiful and painful. Florida and what Florida might represent to Stevens (lushness, the feminine, emotion, poetry) is an object of desire.

Because he cannot inhabit this intense landscape, he flees to the north, to the world of the snowman, the world of "the violent mind." But he is mistaken to think he can leave the muse or what Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has called his "feminine self" behind. For Stevens, Florida becomes a muse in and of itself because the South, like the muse and desire, is alive, cyclical, pungent, and ebbing. And because Stevens wants this for his poetry, the manifestation of Florida, the singing female, returns like Odysseus to the poetic ground of her making in Stevens' wonderful poem "The Idea of Order atKey West."

Not only does the singing female return, but she does so in an enhanced capacity. Of the moving first stanza, the most important lines are the first, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea" and the last two, "That was not ours although we understood, / Inhuman, of the veritable ocean." The two most important words are "beyond" and "inhuman." Indeed, taken together, the two words suggest a certain *ekstasis,* a virtual transcendence beyond the human realm. The song and singer are not "masks," nor are they anything but themselves; however, Stevens is only able to comprehend both in terms of otherness. They are not him. They are not male or northern. They are separate.

While Stevens and the singer overtly maintain a remoteness, readers should not miss the fact that Stevens does understand her. He hears what she is singing. He understands her because she is forming ideas into language. Yet Stevens also understands that he cannot translate her song into purely linguistic or human codes. What she is singing is not only beyond understanding, it also reaches beyond language: "But it was more than that, / More even than her voice, and ours, among / The meaningless plungings of water and the wind." But just as it seems like the poem is going to drift off into the ocean, Stevens brings it back to earth in the next two stanzas. What makes this an amazing poem is his ability to represent inhuman moments in human terms. Or better put, he uses language to express that which is beyond language. Like the singer's song, his poem helps transform the world. Stevens helps readers fulfill their own desires to see a richer, fuller world.

The idea that the poet is a kind of facilitator is fairly new for Stevens in the 1930s. Many people think that "The Idea of Order atKey West" marks a turning point for him, that it signals a shift from the old music of *Harmonium* to the new, more inclusive music of *Ideas of Order.* For instance, in Stevens' often quoted poem, "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," a major poem in *Harmonium,* Hoon' s chant utterly transforms the external landscape, but in "The Idea of Order atKey West," the Floridian landscape goes unchanged. It remains in disorder. The singer does not alter the external world the way Hoon does. The world goes on. Stevens realizes this and accepts it. The singer does not try to order the world. She simply sings. Neither does the listener try to order the world. He merely

listens and allows the song to do the transforming. This is the new Stevens, and this the new song. The Stevens of *Harmonium* would have ended the poem after the fifth stanza, just a few more lines after the above quote, but the Stevens of 1934 adds two, somewhat puzzling stanzas, the most notable aspect of which shows Stevens turning not inward but outward:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me if you know, Why, when the singing ended and we turned Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights, The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,

The temptation is to remain, like the woman and like Hoon, in solitude, but Stevens and his companion do not turn away toward the sea (where order may be found) but toward the town, toward civilization, toward humanity. Of course the criticism can be made that a simple turn of the body is hardly an affirmative social avowal□why couldn't Stevens have simply said "I share this with all of you?"□but Stevens works subtly. His only overt social poem, "Owl's Clover," is considered by most a failure. In Stevens, gesture can be everything. While the act of singing is an act of individual will, turning that will back toward a shared experience and not inward is what delineates this poem from "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," and other similar *Harmonium* poems. Stevens' rage in this final stanza is the rage for the "tortured words" and the "vital words" that speak concurrently for the past, present, and future. Furthermore, it is the "sibylline presence," the female singer who returns as the muse bearing the word on her voice. Through the act of poetry, Stevens is able to translate her voice and his desire into a collective voice, one that speaks and sings of the inhuman ("ghostlier demarcations") and the human ("ourselves and our origins").

Music continues to serve as an important motif for Stevens in *Ideas of Order* because music and poetry elicit a similar affectivity. Music for Stevens is essentially internal, as is poetry. Readers may hear the external notes of music, but they feel the traces the music leaves in their ears. The same goes for poetry. Music is something that is ultimately "taken in" and released over and over in the mind. The female singer in "The Idea of Order atKey West" is not just a singer but a composer both in the musical sense and in the etymological sense (from the Latin *posere,* "to place or to lie down with"). Stevens associates music with both emotion and motion, and he associates all three with poetry and with the harmonies and cacophonies of human desire. So in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens actually says hello to the feminine presence that he originally said farewell to in "Farewell to Florida," and in so doing, he says hello to his feminine self. It is that self, his internal, emotive self, that allows him to link poem and song in "The Idea of Order at Key West," offering readers a vision of a world in which internal and external also begin to harmonize, fulfilling both his and others' desires.

Source: Dean Rader, Critical Essay on "The Idea of Order atKey West," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Barnhisel teaches American literature and has published articles on Ezra Pound and on the publishing industry. In this essay, he argues that "The Idea of Order atKey West" expresses Stevens' most deeply-held questions about the degree to which human perception organizes the world around the person doing the perceiving.

Along with "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "Sunday Morning," "The Idea of Order atKey West" is one of Wallace Stevens' best-known and most anthologized poems. Like many of his works, the poem takes place largely in the head of the narrator and is a meditation on the idea of thinking, on the process of perception, on the faculty of the imagination. From his earliest days as a poet until the end of his life, Stevens' most persistent concern remained the interaction of mind and world. Is the world out there real? Does it have a material existence apart from humans perceiving it? Or is the world as it is seen, heard, and felt just a projection of human imagination? If not, is imagination somehow organizing or ordering the world for humans?

This final question is the one that drives "The Idea of Order atKey West." The poem takes place as the narrator, who is probably Stevens himself (although persona is not an essential aspect of this poem), is walking along the beach inKey West, Florida, and listening to a woman sing. Her song makes him see some kind of order in the natural world, and he begins to wonder whether her singing created that order or whether it just allowed him to see the order.

The book in which the poem in question appears takes its title from the poem. *Ideas of Order* contains many poems meditating on these issues, but Stevens' first book, *Harmonium* (1923), introduces these themes powerfully. Two of that book's poems in particular, "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," are prefigurations of "The Idea of Order atKey West." In "Anecdote of the Jar," the narrator speaks of placing ajar upon a hill; this jar makes "slovenly" the wilderness that "surround that hill." Continuing with his discussion of the jar's effect on the landscape, the narrator notes how the presence of the jar made the wilderness "no longer wild." Its presence organizes the apparently chaotic world around it. Throughout the poem, the narrator contrasts the disorganized fecundity of nature with the sterile organization of the manmade object. The final stanza sums up the jar's effects on the landscape:

It took dominion everywhere. The jar was gray and bare. It did not give of bird or bush, Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The similarities to "The Idea of Order atKey West" are striking. In this poem, the narrator again contrasts manmade art, in this case, a simple jar, with the vast multiplicity of nature. Although he does not actually use the term in either poem, he is clearly referring to it, and in "The Idea of Order atKey West," he calls the singer an "artificer." Stevens does not mean art in the sense that someone uses the word-products of the creative

process that are intended for aesthetic contemplation and enjoyment. Rather Stevens is using the term with its full etymological resonance. The word *art* derives from an Indo-European root that means "to join or fit together." From this root are derived any number of English words that indicate different types of joining or making: artifice, artisan, artifact, artful, articulate, and artificial are examples. Art is organized. It has a principle of order. In the poem, the power of human imagination, which always strives for order and organization, brings out the order in nature.

But, Stevens always asks himself, is the order inherent in nature or does the presence of an artifact that is ordered cause humans to see order that might not really be there? Another of the poems from *Harmonium* proposes an answer to that question. The first stanza of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," in the voice of an unnamed narrator, tells in a highly abstract tone of the narrator's "descent" through "the loneliest air". The second stanza provides us with three questions asked by the narrator: what is the ointment "sprinkled" on his beard? What songs does he hear? What sea carries him? The third stanza answers these questions: his mind provided the ointment, his ears made the "hymns," and the sea was nothing but the world of the poet himself. Concluding the poem, Stevens' narrator tells us that

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw Or heard or felt came not by from myself; And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

In "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," the narrator responds to the implicit questions of the "Anecdote of the Jar." The vivid sensual experiences of the second stanza are, he tells the reader, a product of "my mind" and have no basis in the real world. The sensual world is a product of the mind, the narrator says in this poem. Whether or not the world outside of the mind even exists is called into question (and this is a question that is never far from Stevens' mind).

The two *Harmonium* poems, read together, propose the preeminence of the human mind and of the faculty of the imagination. For all of his continuing fascination with lush tropical landscapes and fecund nature, Stevens is not even sure that the world outside of his mind even exists. Thirteen years later in "Key West," Stevens returns to these issues and brings together his ideas about how human imagination orders experience of the outside world with his suspicions that the human mind might actually create the outside world.

Stevens introduces the idea of creation in the very first line. "She sang beyond the genius of the sea," he tells the readers. "Genius" here must be seen not only in its customary sense, as meaning a great natural ability or intelligence. The word, which derives from a Latin word meaning a "guardian spirit," can also mean the particular spirit of a place or thing and a great natural talent for creating. Already Stevens is searching for a way to explore the difference between what is inherent in nature ("the genius of the sea" meaning the particular spirit of the sea) and what comes from human consciousness ("genius" meaning the woman's ability to create). The sea does not form "to mind or voice," Stevens specifies, meaning that no physical changes can be seen in

the water, yet the sea "made constant cry," presumably in response to the song of the singer.

The next stanza continues the theme of the first stanza, further differentiating between the actual sea and the singer: Stevens wants to be certain that he is not confusing the two. In this, he is implicitly responding to the statements he makes in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," stating that nature is not created by the perceiver.

In the third stanza, the poem begins to respond to the questions that Stevens set out to address. The real subject of the poem is "the spirit that we sought." This "spirit" is not, Stevens takes pains to make clear in the fourth stanza, simply the voice of nature: "If it was only the dark voice of the sea . . . / If it was only the outer voice of sky / And cloud .../... it would have been deep air /... sound alone." But, he makes clear, "it was more than that."

When Stevens breaks the long fourth stanza in the middle, he signals the fundamental break in the poem, which is structured as a question and answer, a cause and effect. The "spirit" mentioned in the third stanza is the creative drive, the imagination, the expressive activity of the singer. "It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing. / She measured to the hour its solitude. / She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang." The vocabulary that Stevens chooses to describe the singer's effect□"acutest," "measured," "artificer"□is the vocabulary of organization, order, exactitude. The jar of "Anecdote of the Jar" comes to mind.

As that stanza proceeds, though, Stevens modifies his earlier rejection of the idea of human consciousness creating the world, and the reader must confront a conundrum: if the sea does exist beyond the singer, how can the singer be the "single artificer of the world / In which she sang"? When she sang, the narrator states, "the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker." So Stevens seems to be saying that the sea does have an independent existence outside of human perception, but no one can know the nature of that existence.

And the location of the singer? Singing, creating, she is lost in her creation. "There never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made," the poet says. But the location of the singer is not the only issue for the poet. He also wants to know what happens to the hearer and, by extension, to the audience of any human creation, or "artifice," and to the hearer's relationship to the natural world during and after the song.

Here Stevens begins speaking to his companion on the beach, Ramon Fernandez. Writing to the critic Renato Poggioli in 1954 (letter reprinted in *Letters of Wallace Stevens),* Stevens denied that the name Ramon Fernandez was intended to refer to the actual Ramon Fernandez, a French critic: "When I was trying to think of a Spanish name for "The Idea of Order," Stevens asserts, "I simply put together by chance two exceedingly common names in order to make one and I did not have in mind Ramon Fernandez." The critic Harold Bloom, among others, argues that Stevens' denials are specious, but for the purposes of this essay, that is not important. The narrator asks

Fernandez, "Why, when the singing ended and we turned / Toward the town," the lights and visual sensations seemed to be ordered, organized, regular?

The last stanza begins with one of the most familiar phrases in Stevens' poetry: "Oh! Blessed rage for order." As the poem ends, Stevens seems to be saying that the human mind craves order in the universe and that the human imagination will impose order upon the chaotic natural world. In a letter that Stevens wrote, in 1935 (reprinted in *Letters of Wallace Stevens),* to his friend Ronald Lane Latimer (who edited the magazine *Alcestis,* in which Stevens published poems), Stevens explains that in "The Idea of Order at Key West"

life has ceased to be a matter of chance. It may be that every man introduces his own order into the life around him and that the idea of order in general is

simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called a fortuitous concourse of personal orders. But still there is order.

The poem is probably Stevens' most important poem on the activities of the human mind when confronted by the sensory overload of nature. Responding to his poems of the 1920s, in which he explored the possibility of human consciousness creating the world around it, Stevens, in this poem, has arrived at the conclusion that human imagination does not create the world, but rather creates the order that is in the world and imposes that order on nature.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, Critical Essay on "The Idea of Order atKey West," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Perkins is an associate professor atPrince George's Community College and has published widely in the field of twentieth-century American and British literature. In the following essay, she explores Stevens's poem as a celebration of the power of imagination.

In a letter written in November 1935, approximately one year after he wrote "The Idea of Order atKey West," Stevens comments on the role of poets:

We are not beginning to get out of the world what it will ultimately yield through poets. If poetry introduces order, and every competent poem introduces order, and if order means peace, even though that particular peace is an illusion, is it any less an illusion than a good many other things that everyone high and low now-a-days concedes to be no longer of any account? Isn't a freshening of life a thing of consequence? It would be a great thing to change the status of the poet.

Stevens believed that it was the duty of poets to create works of art that could help readers order the chaotic experience of life. According to Stevens' premise, through the imagination of the poet, the world would become more understandable and thus the reader would experience "a freshening of life" and a sense of peace, even if that peace were only temporary or illusory. Stevens' "The Idea of Order atKey West" provides one of his best examples of this theory of the power of the poetic imagination.

William Burney, in his critical study in his book *Wallace Stevens,* notes that "the inner focus [in "The Idea of Order atKey West"] is not in the self of the poet but in the world of his poem: what Stevens later called 'my green, my fluent mundo.'" Although the poem opens with a reference to a woman singing by the sea, the focus is on that sea, which becomes a metaphor for human experience and how it can be changed through artistic expression. The poem contains a single concentrated image of meditation from beginning to end on this dominant theme. As the speaker listens to the girl's song, he contemplates the relation of poetry to reality and the power of the imagination.

The sea suggests a state of chaos in its "constant cry," "grinding water," and "gasping wind." Later, Stevens reinforces these images with his description of "the ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea" expressing a "dark voice." Here, the turbulence of the water symbolizes the turbulence of life. The poem illustrates the difficult task of understanding the flux of life in the following lines:

The meaningless plungings of water and the wind, Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres Of sky and sea.

The poem asserts Stevens' point that the poet's role is to help readers make sense of "the meaningless plungings" of existence. The "poet" in "The Idea of Order at Key West" is represented by a woman singing as she walks the beach atKey West. In the first stanza, Stevens illustrates the power of imagination in his juxtaposition of poetry and

reality. While the sea contains its own "genius" it "never formed to mind or voice, / Like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves."

The poem contains a number of careful definitions and rejections where the speaker makes a clear distinction between the woman's song and the voice of the sea:

It may be that in all her phrases stirred The grinding water and the gasping wind; But it was she and not the sea we heard.

The speaker acknowledges that "she was the maker of the song she sang." When he questions what spirit he hears through her song, he again makes a clear distinction between her voice and that of the sea:

If it was only the dark voice of the sea

That rose, or even colored by many waves;

If it was only the outer voice of sky

And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,

However clear, it would have been deep air,

The heaving speech of air, a summer sound

Repeated in a summer without end

And sound alone. But it was more than that,

More even than her voice, and ours

Her song orders the turbulent sea and so makes it significant and comprehensible to the speaker who hears her:

It was her voice that made The sky acutest at its vanishing. She measured to the hour its solitude. She was the single artificer of the world In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea, Whatever self it had, became the self That was her song, for she was the maker. Then

we,

As we beheld her striding there alone, Knew that there never was a world for her Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Lucy Beckett, in her book on Stevens, notes, "As the poem gathers weight... the issues raised by the solitary figure of the girl become wider." The speaker begins to realize at this point that the girl's song is affecting not only his vision of the sea, but also his perspective on the surrounding landscape. He asks his companion,

Why, when the singing ended and we turned Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights, The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there, As the night descended, tilting in the air, Mastered the night and portioned out the sea, Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Beckett argues that

in the end the question is not answered at all; but the poem's marvelous conclusion, suggests in its triumphant but still calm cadences a glimpsed victory over poverty that could be the poet's or could be any man's. 'The spirit that we sought' is not defined, but it is found and found in human sense made of non-human senseless reality.

The poem itself answers the question the speaker raises. As the speaker notes the effect the girl's song has on the listeners' vision of their environment, the poem becomes a metaphor for the transforming power of the poetic voice. The song has stimulated and sensitized the listeners' imagination that organizes and clarifies their experience.

In the same letter quoted in the introduction, Stevens adds,

There is no reason why any poet should not have the status of the philosopher, nor why his poetry should not give up to the keenest minds and the most searching spirits something of what philosophy gives up and, in addition, the peculiar things that only poetry can give.

In "The Idea of Order atKey West," Stevens has created a poem that gives "to the keenest minds and most searching spirits" his philosophy of the power of poetry. The poem offers, "Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." The final image is of the poet's rage to order the words of the sea, with its constantly changing ebbs, flows, and moods that symbolize the chaos of human existence. Those "fragrant portals" become doorways into a deeper experience as the poem helps readers order and therefore more fully comprehend their world.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "The Idea of Order atKey West," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

There is a video in the Voices and Visions series that situates Stevens' poetry in historical and geographical settings. Critics and other poets read and explain his work. The video, entitled *Wallace Stevens: Man Made Out of Words,* was produced by the Center for Visual History in 1988.

You can hear Stevens read "The Idea of Order atKey West" and other poems on the cassette *Wallace Stevens Reads,* distributed by Harper Audio.

Topics for Further Study

Do you agree with the various critical interpretations of the poem? Do you have a different reading? If so, what is the basis for your interpretation of the poem?

Look at some other poems by Stevens, perhaps "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Farewell to Florida," and "The Planet on the Table" and explain how and why the poems are similar or different? Be sure to pay attention to both formal and thematic concerns.

Imagine the poem as a painting. What would it look like? Try to describe it as best you can. Does it remind you of any other paintings or photographs, and if so, which ones does it resemble?

To what degree does the form of the poem mirror or compliment the theme of the poem?

What song do you think the woman is singing? Why?

Do you think that Stevens is the speaker of the poem? Do you think he actually experienced something similar?

Why is a song an appropriate metaphor for a poem?

What Do I Read Next?

Stevens' *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play,* reissued in 1990, is a book that contains the poems "Idea of Order atKey West" and "

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." It also includes the play Bowl, Cat and Broomstick and a prose statement on the poetry of war.

The poet most often compared to Stevens is the great American poet William Carlos Williams, who was Stevens' longtime friend. Like Stevens, Williams held an interest in art and poetic form. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (1986) is a compilation of most of his published poetry.

Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and Jose Rodriguez Feo (1986) collects the letters between Stevens and the talented Cuban poet with whom Stevens maintained close correspondence.

Peter Brazeau gathers stories and other anecdotes from Stevens' friends and coworkers in *Parts of a World, Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography* (1983).

Another poet commonly linked to Stevens is Ezra Pound. His *Selected Poems* (1959) is a good introduction to his work.

Stevens was very interested in painting and art theory. The Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell tries to do in art what Stevens tries to do in poetry. *Robert Motherwell* (1983), edited by H. H. Arnason and Barbaralee Diamonstein, includes both illustrations of and essays about his work.

Another very good book on Stevens is Margaret Dickie's *Lyric Contingencies: Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens* (1991). In her study of the two poets, she shows how Dickinson and Stevens, both private people, write poetry that desires and intends a connection with their audience.

Albert Gelpi's comprehensive study of modern American poetry, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950,* published in 1987, offers readings of Stevens, Crane, Williams, Pound, T. S. Eliot, and other important American poets.

Further Study

Bates, Milton, *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book,* Stanford University Press, 1989.

This is a valuable collection of facsimiles and transcriptions of Stevens' poems and journal entries.

Filreis, Alan, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World,* Princeton University Press, 1991.

Filreis provides one of the very best books on Stevens.

Like Longenbach, Filreis shows how Stevens re-

sponds in his poetry to social and political events of his time.

Fisher, Barbara M., *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous,* University Press of Virginia, 1990.

This book maps the erotic and romantic progress of Stevens throughout his poetry, including an interesting reading of the female singer in "The Idea of Order atKey West."

Richardson, Joan, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years: 1879-1923,* William Morrow, 1988.

Richardson's work is a wonderful biography of the early phase of Stevens' life and poetic career.

---------, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years: 1923-1955,*

William Morrow, 1988.

Richardson's second volume offers an even more compelling reading than the first volume in this series.

Stevens, Holly, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

This text edited by Stevens' daughter, is a very generous collection of his letters to various acquaintances, other writers, and publishers.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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