

The Idea of Order at Key West

By Wallace Stevens

Woman Meets her Years

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.

About the poet

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879, in Reading, 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.

As America 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 attended New York Law School and graduated on June 10, 1903. In 1904, he was admitted to the New 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 in New 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, in Hartford, 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.

About the poem

Written in 1934, "The Idea of Order at Key West" remains one of the most difficult poems by one of America'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 at Key West," is that for a complex poem, its plot is rather simple. An unnamed speaker is walking along the beach 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 about, 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 of Key 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.

The Idea of Order at Key West

Summary and Analysis

Stanzas 1-3: "She sang beyond the genius of the sea" through "That we should ask this often as we sang."

Summary

The first word of the poem introduces a "she," a nameless woman who becomes the poem's focal point for the first four stanzas. She is singing, and in so doing she sings "beyond the genius of the sea," meaning perhaps that she sings with exceptional wisdom, and although her song is connected to the sea in some way, it surpasses the sea's brilliance. The rest of stanza one puts the woman aside for a moment to contemplate the sea, wondering, what kind of entity is the sea, really? As line two says, the water has no "mind or voice," at least, not in the sense that humans do: it is a "body wholly body," a clever way of saying that it is merely a physical form, lacking any abstract spirit or consciousness. However, ("and yet"), the sea and the motion of its waves still emit a "cry:" it has a sort of call of its own that, while not human, communicates something to us that the speaker says he "understood" in some way. Stanza one may leave us more confused by the end of

it, because the speaker is thinking through this paradox just as we, the readers, are: how can the sea, inhuman and voiceless as it is, still have something to say to us?

Stanza two begins rigorously investigating the relationship between the singing woman and the body of water, beginning by firmly separating them as two distinct entities, saying neither one is merely a "mask" for the other. Their sounds (or songs) are also separate, "not medleyed sound," and this is important to specify because, given the poetic setting of a woman singing by the ocean, a reader may already be making assumptions about the woman's song flowing from the sea, or the spirit of nature 'speaking through her.' Indeed, this is the assumption Stevens touches on in the third line of stanza two: "Even if what she sang was what she heard," they are still separate. That is to say, even if we do assume that the woman's music is directly 'inspired' (whatever that means) by the ocean, she is still fundamentally creating her own song. Her singing is different from the crashing waves because it is communicated "word by word," in a form of language that humans have created and can understand. The speaker continues to question how much of the sea's sound goes into the woman's song: even if the rough natural sounds of "grinding water" and "gasping wind" are perfectly conveyed in the singing, the speaker is still technically listening to a human voice, and words created by a human mind. Somehow a transformation occurs, in that the singer takes some pieces of essential meaning from nature and repackages it in a creative human expression. This is the somewhat miraculous process of artistic creation which the poem is interested in exploring: where does the sound of nature end and creative human speech begin?

In the third stanza, the speaker reaffirms the woman's creative authority, assigning her the title of "maker." He pushes further on the question of how the woman creates her song, and what the sea is in relation to her. At first, his solution to this paradox seems to be to discard the importance of the sea entirely: we might read poetic symbols into it ("ever-hooded, tragic-gestured") but ultimately, it is "merely a place by which she walked to sing." There just happens to be water nearby, the speaker says, but it's the woman's song that matters. To this end, he instructs himself and the readers to seek out the "spirit" that must be behind the woman's singing, as an answer to where her inspiration comes from. However, this is likely a red herring: the poem has already rejected the notion of the sea being the quasi-divine "spirit" forming her song, and to pinpoint one abstract "spirit,"

external to the woman herself, as the source of her song would be too easy and cliched of an answer for a poem so invested in the human creative process. Even if we spend as long as Stevens does trying to figure out where human art comes from, the eventual answer might simply be the woman's own powerful mind: nothing more and nothing less.

Analysis

In these three stanzas the speaker faces a set of questions and paradoxes. What is artistic inspiration (considering the singing woman as an artist) and how does it happen? How does nature, symbolized here by the sea, communicate with humans on some deeply-felt level while being nearly incomprehensible by the terms of language and knowledge than humans use? Why does the human mind rely on nature for inspiration, but then gain the power to create something (like a song) that exists completely independent of nature?

The poem progresses very slowly at first, because there are no easy answers to these questions. They are tricky semantic and epistemological issues that require careful thought and clear definitions, hence why the speaker goes to such great lengths to distinguish the woman and the sea from one another. There is a highly symbolic encounter: the nameless woman and her nameless song are stand-ins for any artist and creative work; the sea represents any element of nature that inspires or informs such an artwork. The sea also thus represents the unknown: any force that cannot fully be rationalized or explained in human terms. The woman's creation of a song, then, represents one way that humans attempt to create meaning out of nature's often unsettling confusion and opacity.

The main takeaway message of these stanzas is that the woman's creative mind is powerful. She and the sea are two figures each with some inherent knowledge or meaning in them, but the sea is only able to communicate that meaning with listeners via crude sounds and inscrutable feelings. Thus, by singing a song that is still a reflection of the sea, but which makes itself clear in human words, the woman goes "beyond the genius of the sea." In celebrating this creative power, the speaker perhaps exaggerates when he says the sea was nothing but "a place by which she walked to sing," but this surprising statement shocks the readers into considering the woman just for a moment as an individual, taking the

sea out of the picture, a removal that typical poetic sensibilities would make impossible.

When the speaker asks "Whose spirit is this?" he is perhaps alluding to how he has been taught to read poetry: to focus all your attention on finding one underlying inspiration or source, as if that will be the ultimate answer to the poem's questions. If this question here is ironic (which we can reasonably assume) rather than earnest, it is to point out that this single-minded approach only leads the reader to overlook the complex creativity at work in the artist's mind. Stevens' word choice and double repetition of "knew" as a line ending supports this irony, as the "knew" / "knew" evoke rote memorization, a process of reading that relies too much on certainty and tells the reader what he "should ask" without explaining why. The line break after the second "knew" creates the hidden phrase "the spirit that we sought and knew," also indicating that, in this line of thinking, the reader would presume to already know what kind of "spirit" or inspiration he was trying to uncover, before finding it. Stevens' poem pushes back against that entire approach to reading (or listening), and emphasizes the dynamic mind of the artist, rather than the source of inspiration, as the dominant player in the creation of brilliant art.

The poetic form that Stevens uses is significant in two ways: he keeps a strict iambic pentameter, unlike the free verse so common in his other masterpieces, and uses no standard rhyme except for carefully placed rhymes that sometimes come in a rapid flurry. The metrical form of iambic pentameter was dominant during the Renaissance, as in Shakespeare and Milton, and used heavily up to Stevens' time; however, by the early 20th century, it and other fixed meters were often considered antiquated. They are the forms of antique Romantic verses and eloquent soliloquies: i.e., the genres of poetry that would conflate the "spirit" of the woman's singing with the spirit of the sea without hesitation. Stevens likely chose this form for "The Idea of Order at Key West" in order to engage with that poetic tradition from the inside, so to speak. Iambic pentameter lends his poem formality and organization so it can act as a treatise on poetic creation itself.

Meanwhile, his rhymes and syntax routinely decelerate the poem, keeping it at a painstakingly slow pace, because Stevens is essentially telling readers and poets to slow down, to ask why we assume that artists and nature have some

inherent link, and what actually happens when a person creates art. The simplest internal rhyme is the pairing of "she" and "sea," emphasizing this minimal pair that is so crucial to the poem's study. When end rhymes come in these first stanzas, it is often in repetitive clumps, such as "heard / uttered word by word / stirred / heard" in stanza two, and "sang / sing / knew / knew / sang" in stanza three. Both of these sequences subvert normal iambic pentameter rhyme schemes: instead of introducing new ideas and new rhymes with each line, they force the reader to return to the same words and ideas again and again. Sonically, the poem mimics what it is doing intellectually: examining one relationship (between woman and sea) and then refocusing and looking again, and again.

Stanza 4: "If it was only the dark voice of the sea" through "Except the one she sang and, singing, made."

Summary

In this long stanza, split by a broken line, the speaker delves even further into the identity and creative power of the singing woman. He has established her power as a "maker" of a song that transcends the rough sounds of nature; to emphasize that point again, he begins stanza four by returning his attention to the sea to examine what the "voice of the sea" would be on its own, without the woman singing, and perhaps without even the speaker listening. The summary of the stanza's very long first sentence is that nature's sounds would be mindless and meaningless if humans did not have the creativity necessary to generate language and art. This is true for the sea even when it is "colored by many waves"; it is true for the sky and clouds no matter how "clear" the sounds are. Without the woman's voice creating something that the speaker can understand, the noises of the ocean would be "deep air...a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone." They would be not only meaningless but monotonous, as evidenced by the repetition of "summer" and the phrase "without end." Even time would lose its usual meaning, as humans have created the terminology to describe hours and days and seasons. Without our minds to interpret it, nature would simply exist as a fact, with no further meaning or symbolism.

"But it was more than that," the speaker continues, which we already knew: the woman's song adds above and beyond the sounds of nature. However, the next

line makes an important concession: it was "More even than her voice, and ours." Just as the full experience of hearing a song on a beach cannot exist without the human component, it cannot exist with only the human voice either: the meaningful art is a product of the whole environment. The rest of the sentence pictures nature as huge, intimidating, and unknown, to emphasize the feat required of the artist to derive meaning from nature. The "theatrical distances" and "mountainous atmospheres" contrast sharply with the image of a lone woman standing on the shore, singing.

The second half of the stanza strengthens this testament to the singer's creative power. Though the sea's importance was dismissed in stanza three, it remains a direct relationship with the woman in the latter half of stanza four: now, her song is not just interpreting but redefining and reshaping nature. In the context of her song, the sky's "vanishing" (horizon) becomes acute and poignant to the speaker. He elevates the woman to a nearly divine status during this section, now naming her "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang," which, because of the line break, first reads as simply "the single artificer of the world." The sea's "self" becomes defined solely by the woman's, and the speaker goes so far as to say that the woman has never existed in any world except that which she is currently creating through song. This assertion, like the dismissal of the sea in stanza three, is hyperbolic, but the hyperbole demonstrates the power of the song or art to change its listeners' perceptions of the world, in that it makes the speaker believe this statement. As readers we might know that the "world" created by the singing cannot be infinite or all-encompassing, but what matters is that for the moment, the speaker believes that the world is entirely defined by and contained in the woman's song—and such is the power of art.

Analysis

Stanza four sees the speaker pushing his previous conclusions on the power of the human mind to their limits. First, he does this by imagining the scene without the woman present, and even tries to willingly suspend his own interpretive perspective in the process, in order to consider nature without any interpretive human mind. This thought experiment is predictably difficult for a human mind to achieve. The conspicuous uses of personification such as "dark voice of the sea," "outer voice of sky," and "heaving speech of air" are likely

deliberate, to point out that it is nearly impossible for humans to conceptualize nature without using human descriptors.

In fact, one of the poem's main points is exactly that: the creative interpretations of the human mind are what give meaning and order to nature. This relationship between mind and nature is crucial to life as we know it. Art and song inspired by nature are a particularly strong demonstration of this, because they engage directly in a circular process in which the artist gleans some meaning from nature, interprets and communicates it to listeners, and in the process projects the reconfigured sense of meaning back onto nature, making it understandable and familiar to humans. While stanzas two and three looked merely at how the artist can create something that stands apart from nature, stanza four reveals that this artwork's true power is found in how it can be turned back on nature as a means for its audiences to understand nature emotionally and mentally. The divinity implied by the terms assigned to the woman—"maker," "single artificer," her creation of a world—even suggests that the human mind is godly. (Stevens believed this to a large extent, as he saw the modernist era as a post-theological or post-religious era in which human creations reigned supreme). However, the participation of audiences who experience and carry on the artwork's impact is just as crucial as the creator, and a key focus of the poem's final two stanzas.

Stanzas 5-6: "Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know," through "In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds."

Summary

Stanza five begins with a dramatic shift: the speaker leaves behind the singing woman and addresses his heretofore unnamed companion, Ramon Fernandez. The stanza is an outward shift of perspective: having witnessed the woman on the beach, the speaker turns to his friend in order to reflect on it. He asks Ramon to help explain to him why, after they turned back towards the town, the nighttime harbor suddenly seemed miraculously beautiful and orderly. In his vision, which spans the rest of stanza five, the speaker sees the fishing boat lights carving orderly lines out of the darkness and making the night seem alluring, organized, and harmonious. Specifically, it is the sea that is tamed by the lights.

In the final stanza, the speaker muses rapturously on humans' "blessed rage for order," giving abstract but powerful images of how humans create systems of meaning out of nothingness: "Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred," "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." The poem therefore ends in a broader reflection on how 'makers'—potentially referring to artists, writers, or anyone who exercises creativity—shape the world around them, and indeed feel a compelling innate urge to do so.

Analysis

Although the speaker has already described abstractly how powerful the woman is as an artistic "maker," these two stanzas finally show her power in practice in the lives of the speaker and his friend. Perception is the key here: the harbor has presumably not changed physically, but it now appears in a completely new way to the speaker, because the woman's song and his own thoughts have renewed his faith in the creative powers of people. The sea's role in the poem is still significant, as it is the sea that is "portioned out" by the fishing lights. The meaning that has traveled from the sea through the woman's song is now projected back onto the sea, as its vast unknown waters are turned into something familiar and accessible to humans. The anxiety surrounding the sea is temporarily neutralized, at least for the span of the song's effect on the speaker. Crucially, this effect is only seen through the eyes of the woman's audience; thus, the poem asserts that artistic creations are meaningful based on how they alter their audience's lives. In other words, songs or artworks that go unheard or unseen are wasted.

Moreover, in this poem specifically, this audience effect has special resonance for the speaker because he himself is a poet (or at least, Stevens is). When he waxes rhapsodic in the final stanza about "the maker's rage to order words of the sea," he is partly describing his own need to write poems that help him make sense of life. Words "of ourselves and of our origins" are the types of writings that humans have been creating for millennia, collective histories that form each civilization's identity as they accumulate. This poem then becomes part of a creative chain started by the woman's song. The implication is an empowering one for artists: the profound effect of the original song does not need to end with its immediate audiences, as long as there are other makers listening: i.e., artists can

keep inspiring one another and continue shaping the world around them in ways that make it more manageable for humans.

The speaker's experience is transcendent, and hard for him to describe in full: this is likely why Ramon Fernandez, though he is asked for an opinion, never speaks. The speaker's command, "tell me, if you know," becomes rhetorical, and the absence of a reply seems to suggest that some art is better without further explanation. Many scholars have seen Ramon Fernandez as symbolizing a literary critic, one whose mediating opinion is asked for, but in this case would be unnecessary or would fail to truly capture the experience. The odd use of the phrase "pale Ramon" may suggest that Fernandez is weakened or stunned by the song, so as to be unable to comment yet, so powerful is the woman's creation.

The final line gestures towards the temporary nature of art: if a writer's words are "ghostlier demarcations," they are faint markings overlaid on nature, but within their fleeting lifetime they have the power to change people's perceptions of the world. This ending turns towards a type of humility that was lacking in the rest of the poem as it deified the artist. As the poem ends, the speaker is deep in his own thoughts, and the experience as a whole seems to have given him a firmer and clearer sense of who he is as an artist, and his role in making meaning out of the vast world.

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