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"Hoobla-Hoobla-Hoobla-How": Sound and Meaning in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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Introduction

“The poet, unlike the man who uses language to convey only information, chooses his words for sound as well as for meaning, and he uses the sound as a means of reinforcing his meaning” (Perrine 134). Indeed, sound is meant to play a role in our understanding of poetry. We should not simply scan our eyes over symbols on a page; we should speak the words—bring them into being—and let them wash over us as we reflect on the poem. Poetry walks (perhaps “dances” would be a better verb) the line between music and prose, and by ignoring the audible aspects of a poem, we are missing crucial elements of its meaning. Wallace Stevens is a prime example of a poet who makes full use of sound techniques (meter, rhyme, duration, repetition, etc.) to strengthen the images or sentiments expressed in his poems.

As Stevens wrote, he frequently used the poems themselves to work through some deep philosophical themes. According to Frankenberg, “[Stevens’ poems] are his examinations of himself and the world through the medium of poetry, through the very machinery of his own poems” (226). This awareness of poetry’s link to the tangible experience of the world around us is certainly insightful, and allows Stevens to articulate contemplations on the interconnection of reality and the human imagination.



How Sound Works

Think of the human voice as an instrument. In fact, according to Lanier, “[t]he human voice is practically a reed-instrument of the hautboy class, the vocal cords being the two thin vibrating reeds, and the mouth and throat (buccal cavity) constituting the tube” (31). A person can create sound with their voice in the exact same way that they would create a sound on any reed instrument—by creating vibrations in the vocal cords and shaping those vibrations with their throat and mouth.

How, then, do we hear and interpret these sounds? Consider this very rudimentary explanation: The vibrations created by the human voice travel through the air to the eardrum (or “tympanum”), then through a complex series of fluids and tiny bones, where they are then delivered to the brain and interpreted (25). We perceive the interpretation of these vibrations as sound.

According to Lanier, sounds may be studied in terms of four components: duration (how long a sound lasts), intensity (how loud a sound is), pitch (how high or low a sound is), and tone-color (the smaller sounds that combine to create the sound) (24). We can visualize these various components at work in the image of a guitar string. Once the string is plucked, it is possible to observe how long it vibrates (duration); the distance it moves back and forth, or its “excursion” (intensity); the speed at which it vibrates (pitch); and the additional smaller vibrations that combine with the “fundamental tone” to make up the composite tone (tone-color)¹ (26-30).

Thinking back on the concept of the human voice as an instrument, “[i]t has been found that the ability of the ear to discriminate one vowel-sound from another, and one consonant-sound from another, is due to the fact that the vowels and consonants differ from each other in tone-color just as violin-tones differ from flute-tones, or from reed-tones, in tone-color” (31). Thus, we see an “a” printed on the page, and we know to adjust the muscles of the throat and mouth in such a way as to produce the particular tone-color that goes along with the symbol “a.”

¹This last one, tone-color, can be thought of as the combination of sounds that make a note on a guitar sound different than the same note on a clarinet, for instance.

“Hoobla-Hoobla-Hoobla-How”: Sound and Meaning in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

Kara Robart

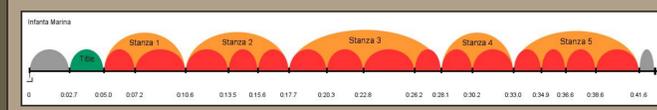
Mentor: Dr. Pablo Peschiera

Mellon Scholars Program, English Department, Hope College



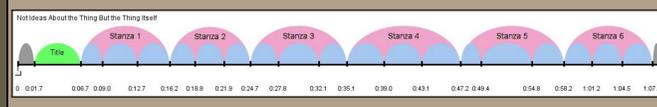
“Infanta Marina”

- Stevens uses onomatopoeia in the third stanza: “The rumpling of the plumes” (line 6). The use of the word “rumpling” emphasizes the action or the sound of the plumes rumpling, thus strengthening the image.
- The mellifluous language created by repeated vowel sounds and soft consonants gives this poem a flowing quality, akin to waves in the sea or a warm summer breeze. This supports the scene described in the poem, which is also set up by the title “Infanta” (essentially a Spanish princess) “Marina” (marine, or sea). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the “her” and “she” referred to throughout the poem is this Princess of the Sea, who walks along the beach at twilight. The euphonious quality of the sounds in the poem matches this image.
- The alliteration Stevens uses mimics the feel of the sea in that the familiar sounds repeat themselves, like waves rolling repeatedly onto a beach. Listen to the “s” sound in the following examples: “She made of the motions of her wrist” (line 3), “Came to be sleights of sails / Over the sea” (lines 8-9), and “subsiding sound” (line 15).



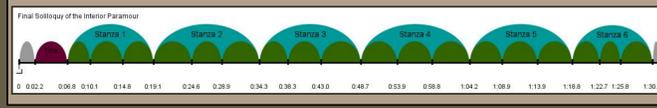
“Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself”

- Notice the words “scrawny cry” in line 2 and line 13. Without the adjective “scrawny,” the cry could really refer to any type of loud noise—a baby crying, for example. But the “aw” sound of “scrawny,” combined with the “c” of “cry” (and also the “c” in “scrawny” itself), evoke a cawing sort of noise, like a crow or a raven. Indeed, in the second stanza, we learn that the cry is a “bird’s cry” (line 5).
- My interpretation of the poem is that it is about the truth of reality, and our interpretation of that truth, based on what we perceive with our senses. Thus, the “he” in the poem is just waking up; he hears the cry from outside and becomes aware of the outside world gradually, by considering and reconsidering the sound. Likewise, the word “outside” is repeated three times, allowing the reader to experience it over and over, just like the man in the poem.



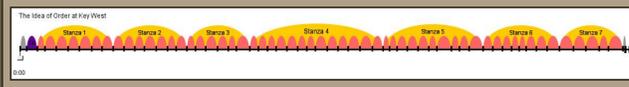
“Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

- In this poem, Stevens uses a lot of hard, guttural consonant sounds such as “g,” “d,” and “k” (sometimes created with a “c”). This relates closely to the meaning of the poem, which is about human thought, knowledge, and imagination. When spoken aloud, the “g,” “d,” and “k” sounds are created very deeply in the throat, similar to the way imagination and thought is fostered in the most internal parts of the human mind. Consider the words: “good” (line 3), “collect” (line 5), “dark” (line 15) and “dwellling” (line 17).



“The Idea of Order at Key West”

- Stevens utilizes alliteration frequently in this poem to contribute to the meaning. For example, in the lines “bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons” (lines 31-32) the h’s are heaped one on top of the other, mimicking the way the bronze shadows are heaped on the horizons. Thus, the image is supported by the sound.
- Rhyme is also helpful in adding meaning. In the second stanza, Stevens writes that “The song and water were not medleyed sound” (line 9) and then he spends the rest of the stanza actually *creating* this “un-medleyed sound” by emphasizing the steady iambic pentameter of the lines. (This metered rhythm provides order and regularity, the opposite of the hodgepodge mixture implied by the word “medley.”) Stevens creates this strong rhythmic effect by using a series of rhyming words (heard, word—twice, stirred, heard—again) at the ends of the lines to draw the reader’s attention to the rhythm of the meter.
- There are a lot of “w” and “s” sounds in this poem, tying in with the sound and feel of wind, water, sky, and sea—which are some of the most essential components of the imagery of the poem.
- Repetition is also a notable technique. Certain words (sky, sea, voice, water, sing/sang/song, and wind) are repeated several times each throughout the poem. On a content level, these words are key components of the poem, so it is appropriate that they are recycled throughout. This repetition brings these words to the forefront of the reader’s mind, making them impossible not to notice. However, I took the repetition one step deeper in meaning. I believe that by continually bringing up these words and the images they evoke, Stevens invites us to visit and revisit them as a way of attempting to make sense of these elements—much like the way the singer in the poem attempts to bring order to these same elements through her song.



Errors

Stevens’ poetry is tricky to read, and even trickier to read aloud. Schwarz explains that “[w]e have to become Stevensphones to read him. He wrenches words from their expected meanings and invents new words.... indeed, frequently he genuinely reinvents the diction, grammar, and syntax of English” (24). As I conducted the recordings, I began to notice that nearly every reader made at least one mistake at some point during the four poems—deleting a word from a line, inserting a word that didn’t belong, replacing one word with another, mixing up the order of the words in a line, etc. As I compiled more recordings, patterns began to emerge—certain lines tended to trip readers up more frequently than others. By examining these particular lines more closely, I was able to perceive several aspects of Stevens’ writing that could easily mislead a reader: word choice, disjointed syntax, placement of line breaks, meter, and sound patterns.

Difficult lines for readers:

- Infanta Marina**
 - “She made of the motions of her wrist” (line 3)
- Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself**
 - “He knew that he heard it,” (line 3)
- Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour**
 - “In which we rest and, for small reason, think” (line 2)
 - “Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,” (line 8)
 - “Within its vital boundary, in the mind.” (line 13)
- The Idea of Order at Key West**
 - “The grinding water and the gasping wind;” (line 13)
 - “It was the spirit that we sought and knew,” (line 19)
 - “The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,” (line 30)
 - “Knew that there was never a world for her” (line 42)
 - “Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,” (line 44)
 - “And of ourselves and our origins,” (line 55)

“Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

Light the | first light | of eve | ning, as in | a room |

In which | we rest | and, for small | reason, | think |

The world | ima | gined is | the ul | timate good. |

This is, | therefore, | the inten | sest ren | dezvous. |

It is | in that | thought that | we collect | ourselves, |

Out of all | the indiff | erences, | into one | thing: |

Conclusion

In his poetry, Wallace Stevens made deliberate use of sound and language to mediate on important philosophical truths. These sounds, as in all poetry, are meant to be read aloud. In poetry, Lanier states, “the characters of print or writing in which the words are embodied are simply signs of sounds; and although originally received by the eye, they are handed over to the ear, are interpreted by the auditory sense, and take their final lodgement, not at all as conceptions of sight, but as conceptions of hearing” (22). Thus, hearing a poem spoken aloud provides the reader with additional means by which to interpret it. Whatever a reader makes of Stevens’ poetry, it is impossible to deny that his mastery of the language is impressive. Stevens’ innovative use of words and their accompanying sounds will continue to make him well worth the study of future generations of poets.

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