"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 meaning, and he uses the sound as a means of reinforcing his meaning” (Perrine 134).

Stevens, Wallace.

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 larynx 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 sound lasts), intensity (how loud a sound is), pitch (high or low pitch), 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 gutar 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) (26-30).

Thinking back on the concept of the human voice as an instrument, “[it 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 “s” 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 “s.”

“Infanta Marina”

“Stevens uses onomatopoeia in the third stanza: “The rumping of the plumes” (line 6). The use of the word “rumping” emphasizes the action or the sound of the plumes rumping, 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 the Princess of the Sea, who walks along the beach at twilight. The euphonic quality of the sounds in the poem matches this image.

The alliteration Stevens mimics the feel of the sea in that 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 skighs of sails / Over the sea” (lines 8-9), and “subsiding sound” (line 15).

“Notations 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 “sc” sound of “scrawny,” combined with the “c” of “cry,” and also the “s” in “scrawny,” itself, evoke a crying 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 “scrawny cry” 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.

“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 horizon” (lines 11-12) the “s” sound is 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.

• Thymus 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 “a” 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 valuable technique. Certain words (sky, sea, voice, water, singing/song, 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.

“Final Silhouette 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, 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 “develop” (line 17).

“Final Silhouette of the Interior Paramour”

In his poetry, Wallace Stevens made deliberate use of sound and language to mediate on important philosophical truths. These sounds, as is 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 heard at the last interpreted by the auditory sense, and take their final lodgement, not at all as conceptions of sight, but as conceptions of sound.” In his poem “How Sound Works,” 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”

a. “She made of the motions of her wrist” (line 3)

b. “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself”

a. “he knew that he heard it” (line 3)

3. “Final Silhouette of the Interior Paramour

a. “in which we rest and, for small, reason think” (line 2)

b. “The world | line | gredis | the | ul | time | great | (line 13)

c. “This is, therefore | the | intem | sest | nen | desecus.” (line 14)

d. “in that | thought | that | we collect | ourselves” (line 44)

e. “And of ourselves and our origins” (line 55)

Conclusion

In his poetry, Wallace Stevens made deliberate use of sound and language to mediate on important philosophical truths. These sounds, as is 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 heard at the last interpreted by the auditory sense, and take their final lodgement, not at all as conceptions of sight, but as conceptions of sound.” In his poem “How Sound Works,” writing that could easily mislead a reader: word choice, disjointed syntax, placement of line breaks, meter, and sound patterns.

Works Cited


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