

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



This [annotated text](#) of Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" was a project of Prof. Ed Gillin's Fall, 2006 class in Modern American Literature (Engl 333). It was moved in August, 2007 from the original [Collaborative Writing Project](#) website to its present site on the Geneseo Wiki. Its page history did not survive the move.

Background

Though most closely associated with [Wallace Stevens' Harmonium](#), Wallace Stevens' first published collection of verse, the poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" first appeared in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse* (1917), a compilation of [Imagist](#) poetry arranged by [Alfred Kreymborg](#) (Bogen, 217). Often cited by critics as a specific example of the influence of [Cubism](#) on Stevens' poetry, the very title of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is noted by Robert Buttel for the fact that it "alludes humorously to the Cubists' practice of incorporating into unity and stasis a number of possible views of the subject observed over a span of time" (165). Certainly Stevens' poem incorporates this idea of parallax (a common theme in [Modernist](#) literature) in more than just its title. As Glen MacLeod writes: "[The poem's] separate, haiku-like stanzas suggest a variety of possible viewpoints like those in a cubist painting. In the same way, Stevens' characteristic manner of organizing long poems into separate but related stanzas might be thought of as cubist" (11). Buttel, too, goes on to say that "the poem combines at least a recognition of Cubism along with what it owes to Imagism and the art of haiku" (165).

A number of critics in addition to MacLeod have perceived the idea of [haiku](#) in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Although the distinct haiku form is not seen in any of the poem's thirteen sections, Nancy Bogen notes in her article "Stevens's Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" that it is, indeed, ever-present in spirit, if nothing else, in much of the text. In her critical analysis, Bogen attributes certain haiku-like qualities to various sections of Stevens' poem, which are included here when applicable (217).

The poem generally uses some variation of the first-person point of view, the only exception being, as Bogen states in her article, an "inexplicable shift to the third person, with no indication as to whom the speaker refers" in section eleven. This section notwithstanding, Bogen describes the variations of the first-person point of view as an "introspective 'I'" in sections two, five, and eight; an "understood 'I'" in sections four and seven; and as having "first-person-like observations or conjectures" in sections three, six, nine, ten, twelve, and thirteen (217-18). Similarly, Helen Vendler sees these variations as "changing forms of self reference," noting that "some of them [are] lyric, some impersonal, some self-satirizing" (15). One may also note that verb tenses vary throughout the course of the poem. Of this, Vendler notes the presence of the present, imperfect, preterit, and future tenses. Vendler mentions as well several shifts in mood, which she lists as "indicative, interrogative, conjectural, conditional, definitional" (15).

Of the numerous scholars who have given significant attention to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," arguably the foremost authority that emerges is [Vendler](#), whose critical vision of the "life issues" of each section is summarized in the appropriate locations. As a whole, Vendler sees the poem as "mediating between the opulent and the minimalist," and, quoting Stevens, as a prime example "the essential gaudiness of poetry" (10). Pertaining to these two antithetical ideas (minimalism and gaudiness,) Vendler sees in the poem the coexistence of "odd diction" with "stanzaic and syntactic minimalism" (10). Vendler goes on to mention that Stevens' "aspectual treatment of reality" in the poem is seen through its "intimat[ion] that there are an infinite number of ways of looking at and symbolizing any piece of reality." She also notes that the poem "raises philosophical issues in fabular, enigmatic, and aphoristic form" (10-11).

Another critic of note is Ethan Lewis, whose examination of Stevens' poem through the specific lens of Imagism is referenced frequently in the explication of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" on this site. Lewis' article makes frequent comparison to the Imagist theory of [Ezra Pound](#), providing an even more unique and insightful look at Stevens' work. Also of important note is Peter McNamara's article "The Multi-Faceted Blackbird And Wallace Stevens' Poetic Vision," which, too, is referenced for each section of this poem.

Annotated Text

I

Among [twenty snowy mountains](#),
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the [blackbird](#).

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the [pantomime](#).

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.