

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird Literary Analysis

Wallace Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," is 13 pictorial representations of perception. The blackbird symbolizes any object that can be perceived, but in some strophes, it is an object that can perceive. Stevens also relates perception back to the idea that poets only have language—symbols—to attempt to convey their vision of something. All we have to communicate is language to represent any object or any point of view, which limits our ability to describe and show others our specific perception. Therefore, writers cannot control how others will perceive their work for every person has an individual perception of objects in the world and of the world itself. This poem creates a philosophical dialogue on perception and discusses the struggle every poet faces with perception.

The first strophe is an introduction to what this poem will explore. Throughout a wide mountainous landscape, the only moving object is the eye of the blackbird (604). The eye of the bird represents sight, which is the most vital sense of how a person perceives and understands all objects in life. Stevens is teasing the reader, he is preparing them for the rest of his ideas and representations in the poem. This strophe is the simplest expression of what he is attempting to convey.

The second strophe takes on a more general idea of perspective when stating:

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there were three blackbirds. (604)

In this context, "I" represents humanity or humans in general, not a first person narration. Stevens explains we are all of a different mind therefore have different chemical

processing of our senses. Also, each bird has a different perception of what is below them, not only because of their different standpoint, but also because of their varied mentality.

The third strophe focuses on the movement of the bird, “The blackbird swirled in the autumn winds,” but the main idea of the strophe is the emotion brought upon by the autumn winds, “It was a small part of the pantomime.” (604) The whimsical emotion of the autumn wind is a prominent part of nature, but it depends upon the reader’s perspective of the beauty. If the wind is blowing leaves hard in your face, it is not a beautiful experience. However, if they are gently swirling around you, that moment conveys beautiful emotions that only the wind and the world could produce. Each movement or change in nature is part of the earth’s pantomime.

Stevens writes in the fourth strophe, “A man and a woman / Are one.” When considering the theme, it can be derived that perception is alike between a man and a woman in that when they each look at a blackbird, they both view a blackbird. However, when including perception, they are still one, but their perceptions of the same thing differs according to their mindset, attentiveness, and other factors of perception. When Stevens writes, “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one” he’s expressing that we are alike in that we perceive each other in our own way, but cannot analyze ourselves objectively (604). The man and the woman each perceive the blackbird, but in their own subjective way.

In the fifth strophe, Stevens plays more with the beauty of understanding involving perception. Steven’s states:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections

Or the beauty of innuendos,” (604)

By saying this, Stevens explores meaning. Decoding meaning can be easy when stated with the bluntness of simple language (inflection). Or, meaning can be coded and hidden in words, body language, and vocal cues (innuendo). Understanding which is more beautiful or useful in life would depend on your perception. The world is subject to both direct statements and coded language.

The sixth stanza paints the picture of a window, blocked by cruel and brutal ice. The blackbird is flying back and forth, casting a shadow through the ice, with no understandable cause (604-605). The bird soaring outside the window presents a frightening image. Especially through “barbaric glass,” which in nature are clouded icicles with the connotation of sharpness and brutality. The shadow of the bird projects an eerie feel from the perspective behind the ice. The phrase “traced in shadow” also conveys mystery and darkness (605). The term “indecipherable” describes the unknown cause of the shadow, a fear of the unknown. However, the perception from outside the window’s clouded view could simply be a bird playing in the crisp winter air. Nature’s clouded glass skews the perception of the blackbird.

The men in the seventh strophe are described as “thin” and are being asked:

Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you? (605).

The men search for golden birds, but their perception is mistaken. The blackbirds at the feet of the women are looking up to them, a sign of admiration. The men have the wrong idea, they should praise all women and should be kissing the feet of the woman around them. If they search for golden birds, they will only find disappointed for golden birds are

nonexistent. The perfect woman does not exist. Men should recognize that women are the carriers of generations to come, women are not simply pretty objects, but humans that should be understood as perfect imperfect beings.

Stevens writes in the eighth strophe, “I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms;” (605). The author is referencing his life as a writer when he speaks of knowing “accents” and “rhythms” but also his struggle by saying “the blackbird is involved in what [he] know[s].” (605) He knows of voice, poetry, and rhythms, but he also knows nothing of them. For due to his limited perspective on writing and literature, he will never fully and objectively understand anything. Therefore, the bird not only represents what he does know, but also what he cannot know. One perspective can have only a finite amount of information and understanding of an object. Unlike God, no one person can objectively view the world.

The world is a series of circles, circles of what you can see and understand. In the ninth strophe, Stevens states:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. (605)

As the bird flies out of the line of vision, it marks the edge of a circle of perception. Humans are all of an individual perspective. Nothing encompasses us all. Poetry attempts to create the biggest circle it can, in hopes it can relate to as many perspectives as possible. When a poet speaks of something or tries to explain their vision, they are consumed by the limitations of a universal language and can only elucidate things in a way that all others will perceive subjectively. A poet’s words are a mere shadow of what they are attempting to express.

Stevens claims in the tenth strophe, after seeing a blackbird flying in green light, that “even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply.” (605) The “bawds of euphony” refers to writers and poets, for they aim to gratify others with pleasing sounds. All poets can do when they admire, understand or create a new part of their perspective is to cry out sharply, as would a blackbird. Their poems are no more than them crying out their perspectives in hopes that others will see the world or an object, or in this case, the bird, in a new light. It’s all they can do in attempts to share with the world. However, the poet cannot describe something without using language and symbols, which limits their ability to convey their perspective.

In the eleventh strophe, Stevens creates imagery of a glass coach and a man frozen by fear due to his equipage casting a shadow, which he mistook for a blackbird. A glass coach does not exist, and neither does a transparent, objective lens on the world. People constantly mistake situations and objects in the world due to their perception of them. Everything is a shadow of what it really is objectively. The narrator mistook the shadow of his glass carriage, which frightened him, but it was simply a misperception of what it really was—a mere shadow.

The couplet, “The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying.” are the only two lines of the twelfth strophe (605). In nature, a river is constantly flowing, changing, adapting, as are people’s perceptions of the world. The real world is constantly beyond us; it will never cease to be misunderstood. The blackbird’s perception, however, flying with the river and seeing it from above, resembles the ultimate objective perspective. The blackbird personifies our attempts to keep up with our own perceptions in life.

The thirteenth, and last, strophe begins with the line, “It was evening all afternoon.” (605) Evening is an ending: the end of a day, the end of daylight, and the end of an experience. This strophe comes to terms with the idea of perception and acknowledges its multidimensional existence. “It was snowing, and it was going to snow” addresses the idea that perception has and always will be a constant (605). Each individual has their own unique perspective, just as all the snowflakes falling have their own unique pattern and design. Lastly, the bird, for the first time, is still. It can finally rest to admire all the different perceptions the snowflakes (humans) have of him.

The form of the poem also leaves room for interpretation based on an individual’s perception. The poem has 13 strophes, each numbered in order. The number 13 has always been referred to as an unlucky one. So, why choose the number if not to represent trouble? The combination of the number 13 and the haunting personality of the creature forces the reader to question its negative motives and meaning. However, the number 13 can also represent promise and blessing. The number 13 is the amount of great blessings given by God in the Bible. As for the blackbird, superstition believes it is accompanied with dark forces and bad omens, though it can also be perceived as a symbol of life in the heavens. The color black suggests every color, or alternatively, the absence of color.

There is no rhyme or structure; however, each strophe contains lines ranging between couplets and septets. The meaning behind the number seven is also left to interpretation; some Christians believe that seven represents the seven layers of hell, but others believe it is a representation of God, for God created the world in seven days. There are also three strophes that are written in first person. The first of which states, “I

was of three minds,” (604). This could represent the idea of the holy trinity, but it could also suggest the superstition that unlucky events occur in threes.

Stevens’ poetry is like a blackbird in some capacity, in that it is something you cannot understand fully. You can only view it and interpret it subjectively; you cannot know it objectively. Whether it is Stevens rereading his own work, or a reader viewing it for the first time, each perception will be inherently different, though they are *looking* at the same thing. Individuals each perceive the blackbird in their own particular way.