

Critical essay on "the idea of order at key west"

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Critical Essay on " The Idea of Order at Key West" Greg Barnhisel Along with " The Emperor of Ice-Cream," " Peter Quince at the Clavier," " Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and " Sunday Morning," " The Idea of Order at Key West" is one of Wallace Stevens' best-known and most anthologized poems. Like many of his works, the poem takes place largely in the head of the narrator and is a meditation on the idea of thinking, on the process of perception, on the faculty of the imagination. From his earliest days as a poet until the end of his life, Stevens' most persistent concern remained the interaction of mind and world. Is the world out there real? Does it have a material existence apart from humans perceiving it? Or is the world as it is seen, heard, and felt just a projection of human imagination? If not, is imagination somehow organizing or ordering the world for humans? For all of his continuing fascination with lush tropical landscapes and fecund nature, Stevens is not even sure that the world outside of his mind even exists. This final question is the one that drives " The Idea of Order at Key West." The poem takes place as the narrator, who is probably Stevens himself (although persona is not an essential aspect of this poem), is walking along the beach in Key West, Florida, and listening to a woman sing. Her song makes him see some kind of order in the natural world, and he begins to wonder whether her singing created that order or whether it just allowed him to see the order. The book in which the poem in question appears takes its title from the poem. Ideas of Order contains many poems meditating on these issues, but Stevens' first book, Harmonium (1923), introduces these themes powerfully. Two of that book's poems in particular, " Anecdote of the Jar" and " Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," are prefigurations of " The Idea of Order at Key West." In " Anecdote of the Jar," the narrator speaks of placing a jar upon a <https://assignbuster.com/critical-essay-on-the-idea-of-order-at-key-west/>

hill; this jar makes "slovenly" the wilderness that "surround that hill."

Continuing with his discussion of the jar's effect on the landscape, the narrator notes how the presence of the jar made the wilderness "no longer wild." Its presence organizes the apparently chaotic world around it.

Throughout the poem, the narrator contrasts the disorganized fecundity of nature with the sterile organization of the manmade object. The final stanza sums up the jar's effects on the landscape: It took dominion everywhere. The jar was gray and bare. It did not give of bird or bush, Like nothing else in Tennessee. The similarities to "The Idea of Order at Key West" are striking.

In this poem, the narrator again contrasts manmade art, in this case, a simple jar, with the vast multiplicity of nature. Although he does not actually use the term in either poem, he is clearly referring to it, and in "The Idea of Order at Key West," he calls the singer an "artificer." Stevens does not mean art in the sense that someone uses the word-products of the creative process that are intended for aesthetic contemplation and enjoyment. Rather Stevens is using the term with its full etymological resonance. The word art derives from an Indo-European root that means "to join or fit together."

From this root are derived any number of English words that indicate different types of joining or making: artifice, artisan, artifact, artful, articulate, and artificial are examples. Art is organized. It has a principle of order. In the poem, the power of human imagination, which always strives for order and organization, brings out the order in nature. But, Stevens always asks himself, is the order inherent in nature or does the presence of an artifact that is ordered cause humans to see order that might not really be there? Another of the poems from *Harmonium* proposes an answer to that question. The first stanza of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," in the voice of an <https://assignbuster.com/critical-essay-on-the-idea-of-order-at-key-west/>

unnamed narrator, tells in a highly abstract tone of the narrator's "descent" through "the loneliest air." The second stanza provides us with three questions asked by the narrator: what is the ointment "sprinkled" on his beard? What songs does he hear? What sea carries him? The third stanza answers these questions: his mind provided the ointment, his ears made the "hymns," and the sea was nothing but the world of the poet himself. Concluding the poem, Stevens' narrator tells us that I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw Or heard or felt came not by from myself; And there I found myself more truly and more strange. In "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," the narrator responds to the implicit questions of the "Anecdote of the Jar." The vivid sensual experiences of the second stanza are, he tells the reader, a product of "my mind" and have no basis in the real world. The sensual world is a product of the mind, the narrator says in this poem. Whether or not the world outside of the mind even exists is called into question (and this is a question that is never far from Stevens' mind). The two Harmonium poems, read together, propose the preeminence of the human mind and of the faculty of the imagination. For all of his continuing fascination with lush tropical landscapes and fecund nature, Stevens is not even sure that the world outside of his mind even exists. Thirteen years later in "Key West," Stevens returns to these issues and brings together his ideas about how human imagination orders experience of the outside world with his suspicions that the human mind might actually create the outside world. Stevens introduces the idea of creation in the very first line. "She sang beyond the genius of the sea," he tells the readers. "Genius" here must be seen not only in its customary sense, as meaning a great natural ability or intelligence. The word, which derives from a Latin word meaning a "

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guardian spirit," can also mean the particular spirit of a place or thing and a great natural talent for creating. Already Stevens is searching for a way to explore the difference between what is inherent in nature ("the genius of the sea" meaning the particular spirit of the sea) and what comes from human consciousness ("genius" meaning the woman's ability to create). The sea does not form "to mind or voice," Stevens specifies, meaning that no physical changes can be seen in the water, yet the sea "made constant cry," presumably in response to the song of the singer. The next stanza continues the theme of the first stanza, further differentiating between the actual sea and the singer: Stevens wants to be certain that he is not confusing the two. In this, he is implicitly responding to the statements he makes in "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," stating that nature is not created by the perceiver. In the third stanza, the poem begins to respond to the questions that Stevens set out to address. The real subject of the poem is "the spirit that we sought." This "spirit" is not, Stevens takes pains to make clear in the fourth stanza, simply the voice of nature: "If it was only the dark voice of the sea. . . . If it was only the outer voice of sky / And clouds / it would have been deep air. . . ./ sound alone." But, he makes clear, "it was more than that." When Stevens breaks the long fourth stanza in the middle, he signals the fundamental break in the poem, which is structured as a question and answer, a cause and effect. The "spirit" mentioned in the third stanza is the creative drive, the imagination, the expressive activity of the singer. "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." The vocabulary that Stevens chooses to describe the singer's effect--"acutest," "measured," "artificer"--is the vocabulary of organization, order,

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exactitude. The jar of "Anecdote of the Jar" comes to mind. As that stanza proceeds, though, Stevens modifies his earlier rejection of the idea of human consciousness creating the world, and the reader must confront a conundrum: if the sea does exist beyond the singer, how can the singer be the "single artificer of the world / In which she sang"? When she sang, the narrator states, "the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker." So Stevens seems to be saying that the sea does have an independent existence outside of human perception, but no one can know the nature of that existence. And the location of the singer? Singing, creating, she is lost in her creation. "There never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made," the poet says. But the location of the singer is not the only issue for the poet. He also wants to know what happens to the hearer and, by extension, to the audience of any human creation, or "artifice," and to the hearer's relationship to the natural world during and after the song. Here Stevens begins speaking to his companion on the beach, Ramon Fernandez. Writing to the critic Renato Poggioli in 1954 (letter reprinted in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*), Stevens denied that the name Ramon Fernandez was intended to refer to the actual Ramon Fernandez, a French critic: "When I was trying to think of a Spanish name for "The Idea of Order," Stevens asserts, "I simply put together by chance two exceedingly common names in order to make one and I did not have in mind Ramon Fernandez." The critic Harold Bloom, among others, argues that Stevens' denials are specious, but for the purposes of this essay, that is not important. The narrator asks Fernandez, "Why, when the singing ended and we turned / Toward the town," the lights and visual sensations seemed to be ordered, organized, regular? The last stanza begins with one of

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the most familiar phrases in Stevens' poetry: " Oh! Blessed rage for order." As the poem ends, Stevens seems to be saying that the human mind craves order in the universe and that the human imagination will impose order upon the chaotic natural world. In a letter that Stevens wrote, in 1935 (reprinted in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*), to his friend Ronald Lane Latimer (who edited the magazine *Alcestis*, in which Stevens published poems), Stevens explains that in " *The Idea of Order at Key West*" life has ceased to be a matter of chance. It may be that every man introduces his own order into the life around him and that the idea of order in general is simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called a fortuitous concourse of personal orders. But still there is order. The poem is probably Stevens' most important poem on the activities of the human mind when confronted by the sensory overload of nature. Responding to his poems of the 1920s, in which he explored the possibility of human consciousness creating the world around it, Stevens, in this poem, has arrived at the conclusion that human imagination does not create the world, but rather creates the order that is in the world and imposes that order on nature. ¹/₄^ Source: Greg Barnhisel, *Critical Essay on " The Idea of Order at Key West," Poetry for Students, Vol. 13, The Gale Group, 2001.* ¹/₄%o