

Dance of a Blackbird: Wallace Stevens's Notion of Supreme Nature

A Brief Analysis of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

Ying-ying Deng, Joan Qionglin Tan

College of Foreign Languages, Hunan University
Changsha Hunan China 410082
shuihendyy@163.com

Abstract: *Wallace Stevens, one of America's most respected poets, is famous for his skillful handling of the philosophy of aesthetics and deep concern about nature in his poetry, while the poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a perfect embodiment of his endeavors to deconstruct the nature/culture dualism and reconstruct the symbiotic relationship between nature and culture in his poetic imagination so as to handle the spiritual crisis in his age. This paper aims to reproduce Stevens's notion of supreme nature as material support, emotional inspiration, spiritual solace, intellectual sources and philosophical reflections to culture presented in his poetry from the perspective of Deconstructivism.*

Keywords: *Wallace Stevens; Supreme Nature; Deconstructivism; Nature/Culture Dualism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), one of America's most respected poets and philosophers of aesthetics, is honored as "the best and most representative American poet of our time" by a noted literary critic Harold Bloom. As Stevens lived through two World Wars, he was greatly influenced by the post-war social and spiritual crises: the loss of faith and integrity and the suspect of reality; the belief that the world is fragmented, chaotic and desperate and the universe is decentered and meaningless as people has abandoned their faith in God. Just as what Stevens wrote in his book *Opus Posthumous*, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption." (Stevens, 1990:185) Therefore, as many other contemporary poets, he turned to the great nature as his spiritual asylum and inspiration to create meaning and order in this chaotic and fragmented world and held that the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality can be achieved in the forms of art and poetry. Superficially, his poems carry a ring of fragmentation and discontinuity in depicting natural scenes and objects, which is hard to understand and grasp the main clue of the whole poem; substantially, the poems serve the purposes of creating order and meaning and explaining the reality and finally justify the existence of human beings in the universe.

In the Judeo-Christian thought, "God is seen as the supreme being, closely followed by men, after which women, children, animals, plants and Nature follow as lesser beings" (Berman, 2001:260) and within this pyramid of dominance emerges other philosophical dualistic divisions, among which nature/culture dualism deserves particular attention. After Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) declared that "God is dead" in his *The Gay Science* (1882), people was beset with the loss of faith, accompanying with a sense of chaos and disorder. Greatly shocked by the then thoughts, Stevens endeavors to reflect his own spiritual anxiety and doubt some philosophical dualisms engendered

from this pyramid of dominance prevalent in the Western culture for a long period in his poetic creation. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a poem anthologized in Stevens's first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, which perfectly illustrates his position on the nature/culture dualism and how human beings can find meaning and the nature of reality through the physical interaction and spiritual exchange with nature. This poem mainly depicts the poet's thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird from different angles by employing his free and fantastic imagination and conveys the ecological wisdom and life philosophy in his immersion into the nature. Generally speaking, "blackbird" was seen as a sacred though destructive bird in Classical Greek folklore, which is also a symbol of something mysterious. However, in this poem, blackbird can be understood as a symbol of nature and the different situations in which the blackbird is viewed can be interpreted as the complicated and complex relationship between nature and culture. Based on the theory of deconstructivism, this paper will reinterpret this poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as a reproduction of Stevens's notion of supreme nature in detail.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Inaugurated by Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science" at a Johns Hopkins University symposium in 1966, deconstruction movement was a critical movement which challenged the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato, that is to say, logocentrism (the desire for center) and the so-called stable binary oppositions and also a rebellion against Structuralism. Deconstructionists, such as Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Paul de Man (1919-1983), Harold Bloom (1930-) and Joseph Hillis Miller, Jr. (1928-), claimed that "the center is not the center" and tried to decenter everything in the world, which can be understood that something acted as a center is part of a structure, but at the same time is outside of this structure. Deconstructionists considered that there are no hierarchies and centers among concepts, culture and nature in particular, and what they have are only differences. And they opposed to the stable binary oppositions and attempted to disintegrate the conventional binary opposition, such as speech and writing, nature and culture, man and woman, body and soul, consciousness and unconsciousness and so on.

Deconstructionists proposed several new notions which represented their strategies of deconstructing the basic metaphysical assumptions. The first one is *différance*, which means both "to differ" and "to defer". To 'differ' is a spatial concept: the sign emerges from a system of differences which are spaced out within the system. To 'defer' is temporal: signifiers enforce an endless postponement of 'presence' (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2004: 171). This terminology is coined to overthrow the dominant conventional binary opposition and decenter the idea of logocentrism, especially, the notions that culture privileges over nature and the arbitrary relationship between signified and signifier in the Saussurian linguistic system. In this sense, the creation of meaning is limited by differences between signified and signifier and deferred by the differences inherent in the signified. Therefore, the signified and the signifier cannot be concurrent. Meaning is not independent, ever proliferating, ever self-complicating and self-constructing, but is in a perpetual interconnection and intertextuality (Chen, 2006:216). The second terminology is *supplément*, which has twofold meanings: one is something that either completes something that is not complete; the other is the addition of something new to something that is already complete. All the criticisms, appreciation and interpretations of a text are tentative supplements to the prior texts and every supplement will be permeated by prior texts and other related texts and carries the traces of prior texts and other related texts (Chen, 2006:216). The third terminology is *intertextuality*, which indicates that a work does not belong to a certain author, nor does it belong to a certain age and its text goes throughout all ages and carries the textual traces of

different authors from different ages. The last terminology is misreading put forward by American deconstructionist Paul de Man. Misreading of a literary work is a corollary of deconstruction, since there is no ultimate and absolute truth in the world and the meaning is in a state of constant motion, either transforming or proliferating, in the process of deconstructing the world and the repeated usage of tropes complicated the ambiguous and indefinite meanings. Misreading also advocates the multiple interpretations and readings of a work.

3. A CLOSE READING OF “THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD”

To begin with, the title of this poem shows the tendency of deconstruction. Generally speaking, we human beings tend to find a definite meaning in understanding certain things, for example, if we want to know something about a blackbird (the blackbird can be seen as an epitome of nature), we will define it from its genus, its appearance and its meaning of existence, even its function catering to human needs. Consciously or unconsciously, we are likely to form our opinion revolving around the blackbird (nature in this sense) and consider it as a center with a definite meaning. However, this is exactly what deconstructivism opposes to. There is no center in the world at all. The title precisely conveys the idea that the traditional center is no center at all, as we can define a blackbird from thirteen ways and the process of looking at does not revolve around a blackbird substantially and the blackbird can be referred to directly or indirectly, or even it can be defined and looked at in the poet's free and wild imagination. In this way, the definite notion of a blackbird is decentered, for a blackbird, as a envoy of nature, can provide various implications, whether materially, spiritually, intellectually and philosophically, to human beings. What's more, the color of a blackbird indicates ill omen and the number of thirteen in the title conveys something ominous, which is the poet's challenge to the reality and traditional opinions of nature as he attempts to present the true features of a symbol of nature without any exaggeration or overstatement. Here begins the spiritual pilgrimage of Stevens, with the agent of a blackbird's dance, into the mysterious nature and pursues meaning and order which culture has failed to provide in this fragmented and chaotic universe. The following deconstruction of the binary opposition between nature and culture underlying in the poem can be achieved from two aspects: the thematic perspective and the rhetoric perspective.

3.1. Thematic Deconstruction

To many Wallace critics and scholars, they tended to interpret “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” as a convincing evidence to illustrate Stevens's literary creation conception or principles, reality-imagination complex which holds that “...often the essential poetry is the result of the conjunction of the unreal and the real, the sentimental and the anti-poetic, the constant interaction of two opposites” (1990:214) and “Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality” (1966:364). Still, a few critics attempted to read this poem from the perspective of ecology, for example, Gyorgi Voros, in his *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1997), explored Stevens's efforts to reimagine the nature and culture dialectic and reintroduce the forgotten term - nature - into poetry. From my viewpoint, I also hold that this poem is Stevens's poetic attempt to prelude Derrida's theoretical deconstruction of the binary opposition of nature and culture prevalent in the dominant Western philosophy since the Greek philosophy. However, unlike Derrida's tendency to replace the nature-culture dualism with the culture monism so as to culturalize nature and finally deconstruct the nature-culture opposition, Stevens held a relatively different attitude towards the relationship between nature and culture as he regards nature as his intellectual, spiritual and philosophical inspirations in his literary creation and common life.

In the opening stanza, readers are likely to conjure such a visual image, that is, vast scenery of mountains without human intervention, among which the eye of a lone blackbird is the only moving thing among twenty snow-capped mountains. It sounds as if the blackbird is the center of the whole world and we tend to define this visual image around the blackbird. Actually, this is the poet's endeavor to set the basic tone for the whole poem as he continues to write it with the tendency to posit nature in a relatively higher position than that of culture in the traditional sense. Objective description as the first stanza is, it embarks on Stevens's intellectual journey of deconstructing the long-standing binary opposition between nature and culture.

In stanza II, the poet plays with word games when he shifts the common idiomatic expression "I was of two minds" into "I was of three minds", which presents a cognitive shock to the readers and indicates that he tries to break the traditional binary oppositions and introduces the third angle in looking at things in the world. As far as I am concerned, I tend to interpret "three minds" as something like what Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) proposed, "id", "ego" and "superego", which is concurrent and fighting in the human mind. The trinity of minds in this poem can be disintegrated into three states of self, namely, the primordial self, the poetic self and the utilitarian self. The primordial self considers itself as an indispensable part of the natural world and yearns to call for the modern people who have lost their faith in God to re-embrace nature and seek spiritual sustenance from the magic nature; the poetic self refers to the artistic representation of nature in arts or poetry, as Stevens announced publicly the role of the poetic self and poetry in his *Collected Poetry and Prose* (1997), "it [poetry] is truly a vital engagement between man and his environment of the world" and "it [poetry] is genuinely a means by which to achieve balance and measure in our circumstances, it is something major and not minor" (1997: 833); the utilitarian self enshrines individuals and short-term interests and gives priority to some egocentric causes and holds that "the excluded sphere is appropriately treated as a means to the ends of the higher sphere or group, that its value lies in its usefulness to the privileged group" (Plumwood, 309) in its interaction with nature. The utilitarian self is not so easily externalized unless sparked. The contrasting selves cognitively construct the working mechanism underlying the whole poem's position on nature/culture dualism. Stevens compares different states of self to a very specific image of three blackbirds in a tree so as to vividly present his stance on this point and show his particular attention to nature.

Stanza II echoes stanza IV in its deconstruction tendency, as in the traditional sense, man and woman are a perfect embodiment of the absolute binary opposition. Furthermore, "the male-female polarity also corresponded with 'an ever greater polarization of mind and nature, reason and feeling, objective and subjective' in the development of modern science" (Li, 1993: 283), thus widening the chasm between nature and culture. However, in Stevens's eyes, "A man and a woman are one", whether through the form of religious lovemaking in Tantrism or the combination of marriage, deconstructs the prevalent binary opposition between man and woman and shocks the nature/culture dualism. Stevens continues to deconstruct the dualism by exclaiming that "A man and a woman and a blackbird are one" which endeavors to include nature into culture or more exactly expands the biotic community to include human beings, which is what ecocriticism believes, "human beings are a part of nature, and nature and culture are interrelated" (Li, 1993: 290). What's more, this line alludes to John Donne's "The Flea" in which the flea acts as the symbol for the binding and fusion of two lovers, though the blackbird here does not convey such symbolic meaning, it completely breaks down the barrier between nature and culture and declares that "nature is all-inclusive, the spontaneously self-generating life process which excludes nothing" (Tu, 1984:118). Meanwhile, stanza IV complements stanza II's emphasis on the competition and contrast among the primordial self, the poetic self and the utilitarian self by focusing on the integration and binding of both external and internal selves and achieving the wholeness and oneness in the universe.

Stanza III and stanza V trigger the blackbird's silent but convincing rebellion against human's degradation of nature and elevation of culture and disrupt the culture-oriented minds. In stanza III, the poet depicts an image of a blackbird being "whirled in the autumn winds" and is "a small part of the pantomime", which exhibits the poet's rebellion against the dominant Saussurian linguistic system, that is, speech privileges over writing, as it proves that the dance of a blackbird as natural graphic writing can create a much more thrilling and impressive effect on human beings than the man-made visual art in the human society. In stanza V, the narrator does not know which one to prefer, "the beauty of inflections or the beauty of innuendoes", which stands for two situations, that is, "the blackbird whistling" and the blackbird stops whistling. "The beauty of inflections" and "the blackbird whistling" refer to the lively nature where different kinds of melodies and tunes, whether voiced by animals or plants, can be heard and enjoyed. While "the beauty of innuendoes" and "the silence after the blackbird's whistling" can be interpreted as the silent nature after all natural melodies and tunes disappeared whether due to the overuse of pesticide as described by Rachel Carson in her *Silent Spring* (1962) or due to the artificial and simulated surroundings created by human beings in the modern cities. The superficially hesitating choice implies the hidden conflict between the primordial self and the utilitarian self, between ecological mentality and interests-driven mentality, which externalizes modern people's subconscious predicament and lays the foundation for the poet's following endeavors to subvert nature/culture dualism from other perspectives.

On the surface, the following three stanzas are discrete and even irrelevant, which create a baffling air to the understanding of the whole poem. Actually, it is the poet's efforts to justify and glorify the great existence of nature from various viewpoints. Materially, though icicles, as common natural objects, are cold and relentless, they provide "barbaric glass" to encrust windows in the cold winter, which, to some extent, enables human beings to withstand blustery and other unknown threats. Emotionally, "the shadow of the blackbird" symbolizes the natural trigger which enables human beings to elicit some ungraspable and indecipherable inspirations and intuition from the great nature, especially for the poets and artists, whose process is just like what William Wordsworth (1770-1850) articulated, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (1991: 251). Spiritually, stanza VII poses a thought-provoking question that why men of Haddam "imagine golden birds" beyond them and ignore the blackbird near them. "Haddam", as Stevens explained in his letter to a famous Italian aesthete Renzo Poggioli, is a time-honored town in Connecticut characterized by a mixed touch of northern United States and exotic Middle East, which is a perfect epitome of modern city. Here, "golden birds" refer to something sacred or something unreachable which can be traced to Brothers Grimm fairy tale "The Golden Bird" and stands for the material pursuits, such as money, power, fame and social status, in this poem, while blackbird is a symbol of nature representing the primordial life vitality. The material pursuits, however, exhaust human beings, as can be perceived by the word "thin men", which is Stevens's criticism on modern people's spiritual wilderness resulted from excessive materialistic pursuits. Furthermore, men of Haddam hold the traditional logic of patriarchal domination that they not only ignore the blackbird as a symbol of nature, but also pay no attention to the women about them. In this sense, Stevens intends to deconstruct the twin dominations of both nature and women by exposing the spiritual barrenness of men and appeals to them to seek spiritual solace from the great nature. Intellectually, stanza VIII introduces an erudite and somehow arrogant narrator who knows "noble accents/ And lucid, inescapable rhythms". However, nature, as an omnipresent and omniscient being, has already known everything and is the source of human knowledge. In this way, Stevens successfully smashes the fallacy that culture is superior to nature and subverts the nature/culture dualism.

The poet, as the poetic self, is trying to moderate the longstanding collision between the primordial self and the utilitarian self, as it presents that nature and culture are interrelated and nature nourishes culture by serving as material support, emotional inspiration, spiritual solace and intellectual fountain to culture. Therefore, there is no reason why we should give our priority to culture while degrading nature. The poetic self, in the following three stanzas, adopts the reverse dialectic to deconstruct the superiority of culture over nature, that is, what if nature has been lost and destroyed? Stanza IX and stanza X depicts the flying-away of the blackbird, which may symbolizes the loss of nature due to human beings' over exploitation of nature, and people's intensive reaction to it, even the people with the sweet euphony "would cry out sharply" and amiss. Obviously, the poet indicates that the loss of nature will bring about a great spiritual shock to human beings, as has been vividly depicted in stanza XI. A traveler, riding a glass coach, is frightened in his journey as he mistook "The shadow of his equipage/For blackbirds", which is a reflection of human beings' fear of nature's retaliation after they have completely destroyed nature. In the meanwhile, the glass coach suggests extreme fragility, coupled with an illusion of transparency, which can be interpreted as human beings' fearful and guilty states resulting from their unfair treatment of nature. Therefore, the whole stanza expresses the predictable spiritual distress human beings may encounter after they isolate themselves from the great nature. Actually, these three stanzas are the true depictions of the then society when people are greatly destroyed by the wars, whether physically or spiritually, and had lost their faith in everything, including the great nature. Stevens put forward his own solutions to people's fear and guilt by proclaiming that "We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground/Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure/Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness" in "The Poem as Icon" and the real religion lies not in the church but in the world itself: the mysterious call of nature, thus calling for people to re-embrace nature and clearly expressing his poetics on nature.

Stanza XII is a verse full of philosophical aphorism. "The river is moving/ The blackbird must be flying" indicates nature is in an everlasting process of change and mobility and no matter what happens to the living and non-living creatures inhabited on the earth, nature will march in its due course, which in return consoles the faithless and fearful human beings and enables them to realize the self-healing and self-renewing power of nature. Seemingly objective description as it is, the last stanza reflects the poet's profound thoughts on the aging, death and rebirth of nature both in the physical and philosophical sense. Philosophically, "It was evening all afternoon" indicates that everything on earth will meet its aging and death in the end and "It was snowing", "And it was going to snow" shows that there is a pair of experienced eyes who has witnessed the circulating transitions of nature before, thus forecasting the future pictures of natural processes. "The blackbird sat/In the cedar-limbs" motionlessly, which can be interpreted that it is that pair of experienced eyes who has witnessed the aging and death of nature and believed that nature will be reborn again. The last two stanzas implicitly exhibit Stevens's efforts to overthrow the traditional binary opposition between nature and culture by depicting the self-generation and eternity of nature and ephemerality of human cultures.

3.2. Rhetoric Deconstruction

Stevens' strategies to deconstruct nature/culture dualism aren't limited to the thematic deconstruction, but also involve in the rhetoric deconstruction, which consolidates his notion of supreme nature in his poetic imagination. This poem consists of thirteen short and separate stanzas, whose forms imitate the Japanese poetic form haiku, "one-breath poetry, traditionally seventeen syllables (5-7-5), now increasingly practiced outside Japan as a free-style form, usually in three lines" (Rosenstock, 2009: front page), however, none of the stanzas meet the traditional definition of haiku. As we can see from

the whole poem, no single stanza follows the form of seventeen syllables, in three lines of five, seven, and five, but each of which mentions blackbirds in some way and focuses on the intuitions and inspirations from nature, thus achieving the highlighting of nature in poet's literary creation. Moreover, according to Rosenstock, haiku "owes its impact and inspiration to a meditative flash in which he/she who experiences the haiku moment merges suddenly with perceived phenomena" (Rosenstock, 2009: front page). Though the whole poem is discrete and inconsistent among successive stanzas on the surface, it truly reflects the meditative flashes the poet perceives in his interaction with nature and a constant motif that nature is the everlasting fountain for survival and creation. Therefore, the superficial deconstruction of the poetic form serves the underlying consistent motif, that is, Stevens's notion of supreme nature.

Traditionally, a blackbird (another name for a crow in the United States) symbolizes despair and death in the western culture, as Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) described in his long poem "The Raven" (1845). However, in Stevens's mind, a blackbird, as an envoy of nature, is full of natural divinity and vitality, whose appearance and disappearance in the human beings' sight spark various intellectual and philosophical reflections on their relationship with nature and their own existence in the universe, thus subverting its negative image in the human culture. Then, Stevens depicts thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird; as is known to all, the number of thirteen conveys something ominous in the Christian culture, while in this poem, thirteen, without any cultural connotations, indicates various ways to understand nature and reflect ourselves. In this sense, Stevens successfully deconstructs the cultural stereotypes engraved on a common living creature and a common number in the nature and reconstruct human being's knowledge of nature and the interconnectedness between nature and culture.

Intertextuality, in Derrida's mind, indicates that a work does not belong to a certain author, nor does it belong to a certain age and its text goes throughout all ages and carries the textual traces of different authors from different ages. Every text, every paragraph or even every sentence is interwoven by numerous signifiers and other discourses (Chen, 2006: 216). Every text is a tissue interlaced with multiple voices, countless quotations, allusions and references, thus bearing the traces of neterogeny, fragmentation and multi-voice. The intertextuality is not only a linguistic intertextuality, but also a cultural and thinking intertextuality (Wang & Zhu, 2004:71). "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is an intertext supplemented and replenished by various prior cultural texts, whether oriental or occidental. In terms of poetic form, the adaptation of Japanese haiku adds novelty and neterogeny to the whole poem, echoing the then state of collapsing faith in Almighty God and seeking spiritual solace from other poetic forms which enshrines nature as the final destiny. In content, stanza II carries the traces of Freudian psychoanalytic approach to reflect oneself and view the whole world. Stanza IV is characterized by a ring of Taoism, as Lao Tsu (571 BC - 471BC) believed, "Exemplifying oneness, flowing in peace and harmony, not distinguishing, not judging, is the nature of Infinity." (Worldpeace, 1997) The town "Haddam" and "golden birds" in stanza VII remind the readers of a flavor of Arabesque, while "Connecticut" and "glass coach" zap us back to nineteenth-century Gothic novels where people ride through dark forests in carriages in nightmare in fear of encountering bandits and kidnappers. The rest stanzas retain a breath of romanticism which believes that a close connection with nature was mentally and morally healthy. The whole poem is like a cinematic collage of various linguistic, cultural and thinking texts, which implies Stevens's efforts to find a solution to handle the spiritual crisis in his age and to reconstruct his notion of supreme nature in his poetic imagination and common life.

4. CONCLUSION

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is a perfect embodiment of Stevens’ attempts to deconstruct the nature/culture dualism and reconstruct the relationship between nature and culture in his poetry. This paper focuses on analyzing how Stevens break up the binary opposition between nature and culture both in the thematic and rhetoric perspectives by introducing his viewpoint of nature as material support, emotional inspiration, spiritual solace, intellectual sources and philosophical reflections to culture, thus constructing his notion of supreme nature, fulfilling his duty as a poet to “help people live their lives” (1951:29) and achieving the goal of finding meaning and order in the great nature which culture has failed to provide in this fragmented and chaotic universe.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Yingying DENG (1990–) is a postgraduate student of English at the College of Foreign Languages of Hunan University. Her academic interest is a comparative study on eco literature.

shuihendyy@163.com