

**Poetry**  
**Professor. S.P. Dhanavel**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture No. 53**  
**Wallace Stevens**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)

## Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Wallace Stevens
- Imagination/ Poetry/ Poet
- “Anecdote of the Jar”
- “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”
- Analysis



Hello, in this lecture, we will look at Wallace Stevens and his poems. To begin with, we will pay attention to the historical and literary context, then, see his life. Further we will understand his idea of imagination with reference to poetry and poet. Then we will analyse two poems, “Anecdote of the Jar” and “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and conclude.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:47)

## Historical and Literary Context

- First two worlds wars and America's participation
- The Great Depression of 1929
- The 'Lost Generation' of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, e. e. cummings, Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane,
- The publication of *Poetry* magazine in 1912 in Chicago
- The rise of Robert Frost and T S Eliot as formidable poets
- Modernist poetry through Pound's influence
- Imagistic, incoherent, difficult, elite poetry
- American Modernists with a difference
- W. Stevens, W. C Williams, H.D., M. Moore, E. Bishop



When we see the historical and literary context, we come across the first 2 world wars and the American participation in the 2 world wars. In addition to this, we also see the Great Depression of 1929 having its effect on the whole of American people. As a result of these two major events, two world wars and this Great Depression. We see one generation called the 'Lost Generation' of writers like Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, John Passos, E. E. Cummings, Archibald MacLeish and Hart Crane.

During this time, we find the publication of the Poetry magazine in 1912 from Chicago by Harriet Monroe. At the same time, we find the rise of Robert Frost and T.S Eliot as formidable poets, both are Americans, but one that is Eliot, settled in England. It was the time when modernist poetry was growing through the influence of Ezra Pound. Modernist poetry was considered to be imagistic, incoherent, difficult and elite poetry.

However, in the American continent, we have modernists with a difference, Wallace Stevens, William Carolos William, Hilda Doolittle, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop. They practised modernism in their own ways among other poets.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:26)

### Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

- Trained in Greek and Latin classics; a great orator
- Wrote for *Harvard Advocate* and also *Harvard Monthly*, edited the latter.
- Abandoned literary pursuits to become a lawyer
- Worked for insurance companies
- Retired as Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company
- Started late but lived a productive & successful in life.
- **Interest in words and sounds** kept him busy with poetry.
- Difficult, allusive, metalinguistic, metapoetic,
- Known for "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "The Man on the Dump," "Sunday Morning," "**Anecdote of the Jar,**" "**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**"



Now, let us see Wallace Stevens. He was trained in Greek and Latin classics, and he became one of the great orators in his own days. When he went to Harvard, he wrote for this magazine in Harvard Advocate. And later, he also wrote for Harvard Monthly and then had a chance to edit this magazine. In this magazine, he was able to publish many of his poems when he did not get contribution from other friends and students.

He was training himself in this literary pursuit but then he had to abandon literary pursuits to become a lawyer. He worked for insurance companies throughout his life. He retired as vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company at last. He started his career as a poet very late. But then, he had a productive and successful life. He was able to become successful because of his keen interest in words and sounds. And this interest kept him busy with poetry and his life.

However, this poetry, like any other modernist poem was difficult, allusive, metalinguistic, metapoetic. That means, it was more about poems, more about language, more about imagination, the process of creation than about anything else. Some of the examples we have are “The Emperor of Ice cream,” “The Man on the Dump,” “Sunday Morning,” “Anecdote of the Jar,” “Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

(Refer Slide Time: 04:10)

## Imagination/ Poetry/ Poet

Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves [in contrast to Frost]. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that [the artist's] function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives.

Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (1951)



What does Stevens say about imagination, poetry and poet? Here, we have a quotation from his book, “The Necessary Angel,”

“Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion  
in which they find themselves”

This is [in contrast to Frost], who says,

“A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom and  
a poem is a momentary stay against confusion.

“Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their



The jar was round upon the ground

And tall and of a port in air.

It took **dominion** everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird of bush,

Like nothing else in **Tennessee.**”

It is a short poem, it looks like a traditional poem, let us see what it is all about.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:06)

### Thematic Contrast

- Man (speaker) and Nature (hill)
  - Product (jar) and Plant (wilderness)
  - Domesticity and Wilderness
  - Plain Land and Hill
  - Earth and Heaven (a port in air)
  - Dominion and Free Land
  - Imagination and Reality
- An anecdote of a poem; a short amusing story;  
“a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury  
signifying nothing” Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*



First, let us pay attention to the thematic contrast that we have in this poem between man, the speaker of the poem and nature, that is the hill in this poem. We have a product that is jar, this jar is manufactured product, that is why we have used the word product and then we have the wilderness with many kinds of bushes, plants, and things like that. We have domesticity and wilderness, plain land and hill, earth and heaven. This idea of heaven is connected to this expression, a port in air.

Probably, this jar is kind of a link between earth and heaven. We have this dominion on one hand and free land on the other hand, then imagination and reality. This anecdote of the jar is like an anecdote of a poem. What is an anecdote? It is a short amusing story. This reminds us of tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

When Macbeth was interested in becoming the king, when he was possessed by the desire to become the king.

That is to have power, then he was not aware of the consequences, but later on when he became the king, he understood that it was not an easy job. The kind of human intervention that we have in nature, is what is something that we have to think about seriously. At least, at this time of Covid 19.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:42)

## Poetic Devices

- **Metaphor/Symbol:** Jar for imagination, the human being
- **Metaphor/ Symbol:** Hill (2 and 4) for Nature
- **Assonance:** round upon the ground (2)
- **Assonance :** slovenly wilderness (3)
- **Alliteration:** bird or bush (11)
- **Simile:** Like nothing else in Tennessee (12)  
meaningless meaning? Incomparable?
- **Irony:** the jar takes control of the hill.



Let us see the poetic devices in this poem. We have metaphors, symbols and other devices. Let us see metaphors and symbols in this jar. This jar is a symbol of human product, human imagination, the whole human being. Next, we have the hill, as a metaphor or symbol for the whole of nature. We have assonance in round upon the ground, assonance in slovenly wilderness; again, alliteration in bird or bush. This is something very interesting to see. The bird is something like an animal and bush is something like a plant life, which are contrasted with human life.

We have a simile, it looks like a simile, but it does not give much meaning like nothing else in Tennessee, that is why we have raised a question, does it create a meaningless meaning? Is the jar so incomparable? That kind of question we raise here. Then, the whole irony of the poem is that the jar takes control of the hill. Is that good for the hill? Is it good for humanity? That is what we have to ask. This Anecdote of the Jar is a very interesting poem, it has attracted and appealed to many readers throughout the world.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:00)

## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



**Form:** Three quatrains, 12 lines

**Rhyme:** Unrhymed verse, but not completely free verse.

**Rhythm:** generally iamb; variations of trochee

**Caesura, Enjambment, End-stopped lines:**

I placed | a jar | in Ten | nessee, (tetra)

And round | it was, | upon | a hill.

It made | the slo | venly | wilderness ➤

Surround | that hill. (di)

**Meter:** Predominantly tetra-, but di- and tri- are observed.

Hence, iambic tetrameter.

**Repetition:** Tennessee, round, surround, wild, hill, jar



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter now. When we see the form, we have 3 quatrains that is, 12 lines. Then when we see the rhyme, we find that it is unrhymed. But it also has some kind of rhyme scheme. Some words are rhymed. Then we come to rhythm and find that generally on the whole, the poem is iambic but then we have some variations of trochee and others.

Let us see the Caesura, Enjambment and end-stopped lines in the example we have here, in the first stanza.

“I placed a jar in Tennessee

And round it was, upon a hill.

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.”

So, Caesura, we have in that comma indicated ‘it was’ and then enjambment after ‘wilderness surround’ then end-stopped lines at the end full stop, we have ‘a hill,’ ‘that hill.’

The meter is predominantly tetra, that means just 4 feet. We also have di meter in this poem. We can on the whole say this poem has iambic tetrameter. We also have repetition of words like Tennessee, round, surround, wild, hill, jar. These repetitions actually make up this rhyme that we have in this poem. Rhyme, rhythm, repetition, all these 3 contribute to make this poem a great poem.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:34)

## Overall Impression



- The speaker placed a jar upon a hill in Tennessee and found that the jar began to dominate the environment.
- In fact, the human intervention in nature radically alters the scene in favor of humans, and not nature.
- Unlike the green nature, the jar was gray and bare and did not give of bird or bush, i.e., animal or plant life.
- The speaker's imagination of the jar on a hill was nothing like anything in the natural climate of Tennessee.
- Imagination may control the thought process of human beings with little action on the ground.



To give an overall impression of the poem, let us look at these points. The speaker placed a jar upon a hill in Tennessee and found that the jar began to dominate the environment. In fact, the human intervention in nature radically alters the scene in favour of human and not nature. Unlike the green nature, the jar was gray and bare and did not give of bird or bush, that is animal or plant life. The speaker's imagination of the jar on a hill was nothing like anything in the natural climate of Tennessee. Imagination may control the thought process of human beings with little action on the ground. So, we can see the gap between imagination and reality.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:25)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



I  
Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird. (motion & stillness)

II  
I was of three minds,  
Like a tree 5  
In which there are three blackbirds. (one & many)

III  
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime. (reality and show)



Here, we come to one of the most interesting poems in American literature, “Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” This is a poem of perception; looking at an object in different ways, why 13? That is Stevens, unconventional, looking at something from different points of view. Let us read the 13 stanzas, they are like Haikus, 3 lines or 2 lines we have unconventional poetry here in this poem.

Let us read them, we have also indicated some basic contrast within each stanza in brackets like what we have in stanza 1, motion and stillness. These two are contrasted in this particular stanza.

“Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird. (motion & stillness)

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree,  
In which there are three blackbirds. (one & many)

The blackbird whirled in autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime. (reality & show)

(Refer Slide Time: 12:36)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



IV

A man and a woman

Are one.

10

A man and a woman and a blackbird

Are one.

(one & many)

V

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections

Or the beauty of innuendoes,

15

The blackbird whistling

Or just after.

(direct & indirect)



“A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird

Are one.

(one & many)

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections

Or the beauty of innuendoes,

The blackbird whistling

Or just after.

(direct & indirect)

(Refer Slide Time: 12:55)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



VI

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The **shadow** of the blackbird 20  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the **shadow**  
An indecipherable cause. (cause & effect)

VII

O thin men of Haddam, 25  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you? (near & far)



“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. (cause & effect)

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? (near & far)

(Refer Slide Time: 13:22)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



VIII

I **know** noble accents 30  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I **know**, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I **know**. (the poet & the bird)

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight, 35  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles. (present & absent)



I **know** the noble accents

And lucid, inescapable rhythms;

But I **know**, too,

That the blackbird is involved

In what I **know**. (the poet & the bird)

When the blackbird flew out of sight,

It marked the edge

Of one of many circles. (present & absent)

(Refer Slide Time: 13:40)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony 40  
Would cry out sharply. (sight & sound)

XI

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook 45  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds. (fear & imagination)



“At the sight of blackbirds,

Flying in a green light,

Even the bawds of euphony

Would cry out sharply. (sight & sound)

He rode over Connecticut

In a glass coach. Once, a fear pierced him,

In that he mistook

The shadow of his equipage

For blackbirds. (fear & imagination)

(Refer Slide Time: 13:58)

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird



XII

The river **is** moving.

The blackbird **must be** flying. (motion & stillness)

XIII

It **was** evening all afternoon.

50

It **was** snowing

And it **was** going to snow.

The blackbird **sat**

In the cedar-limbs. (observer & observed)



The river **is** moving,

The blackbird **must be** flying.

It **was** evening all afternoon,

It **was** snowing

And it **was** going to snow.

The blackbird **sat**

In the cedar-limbs. (observer & observed)

These are the thirteen Haiku like poems, stanzas we have in ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’ What is this blackbird? Obviously, it has some symbolic reference.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:27)

## Thematic Contrast

- White and Black (binary perceptions)
- Mind and Nature
- Imagination and Reality
- Man and Woman
- Human beings and Birds
- Beauty and Ugliness
- Golden bird and Blackbird
- One and Many
- Shadow and Reality
- Forenoon and Afternoon (temporal continuum)
- Observer and Observed (Perceiver and Perceived)



Let us see the thematic contrast here, which we indicated in every stanza through brackets like one and many, present absent, cause and effect, motion and stillness, here we can see some of them being summed up. White and black, actually in the perceptual context, this white and black is to discriminate things very clearly. But in nature, in reality, it does not happen. That is why we have used the expression binary perceptions through the colors white and black.

Then, let us see all of them. Mind and nature, imagination and reality, man and woman, human beings and birds, beauty and ugliness, golden bird and blackbird, one and many, shadow and reality, forenoon and afternoon, lastly, observer and observed. When it comes to forenoon and afternoon, it refers to time and can we really differentiate between forenoon and afternoon? Is it not a kind of continuum, temporal continuum that we have? That is the kind of question that is at the centre of this poem. Similarly, what is the difference between the perceiver and the perceived? We have a kind of contact; we have a kind of relationship and what is observed is closely related to who is observing.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:55)

## Poetic Devices

- Symbol:** Blackbird for Reality (title)
- Consonance:** twenty snowy mountains (1)
- Assonance:** The only omoving thing (2)
- Simile:** Like a tree (5)
- Assonance:** Icicles filled the long o window (18)
- Alliteration/ Assonance:** know noble (30)
- Apostrophe:** O thin men of Haddam, (25)
- Assonance:** Flying in a green light, (39)
- Poetic Form:** like the Haiku with comments on seasons



A number of poetic devices in the poem are there, of course, the symbol of the black bird for reality is the most dominant of the symbols in this poem. We have consonance in twenty snowy mountains, twenty snowy mountains and one blackbird that to the eye, the moving eye of the blackbird. That is the kind of drawing attention of the reader to the poem to the action in the poem.

We have assonance in the only moving thing. Then we have a simile like a tree; three, tree, this is how Stevens plays with words. Then, assonances in icicles filled the long window. Alliteration and assonance together we have in these two words know, noble. Apostrophe, O thin men of Haddam; Haddam is a city with various meanings, city in America, city in the ancient period. Assonance, 'Flying in a green light,' poetic form is that of Haiku with comments on seasons and other objects which are visible in that particular perceptual context.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:15)

## Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** unrhymed free verse
- **Rhythm:** Predominantly iamb in this section
- **Enjambment and End-stopped line:**
  - I do | not know | which to | prefer, (4 feet)
  - The beau | ty of | inflec | tions ➤
  - Or the | beauty | of innu | endoes, (4 feet)
  - The black | bird whi | stling ➤
  - Or just | after. (13-17)
- **Meter:** tetra with many variations
- Hence, polymetrical.



Let us see the rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. Of course, this is a free kind of verse so we do not have much rhyme, rhythm is predominantly iambic in the section that we have chosen here and in other sections, it may vary that is why it is called polymetrical. Then let us see the enjambment and end-stopped line:

“I do|not know|which to prefer,  
The beau|ty of inflec|tions  
Or the|beauty of innu|endoes,  
The black bird whi|stling  
Or just|after.”

So, we have this enjambment in inflections or the beauty of innuendoes, then again bird whistling or just after. We have 4 feet in one line and 2 feet in another line. That is why we call it polymetrical. There are many variations but the major one is tetra meter that we find in this poem.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:16)

## Overall Impression

- This poem offers thirteen snapshots of a blackbird for expanding our perceptive power.
- What is contrasting and unique draws our attention like the moving eye of the blackbird in snowy mountains.
- **We have as many minds and eyes as the objects in nature to see each of them individually.**
- The blackbird puts up a show as men and women do.
- We can see the blackbird or its shadow (or nothing) depending on our vantage point.
- Poets see reality and project it to us on a screen.
- We have our vision only as far as the object appears.
- We can imagine the objects, though.



What do all these poetic devices and rhyme, rhythm, meter mean? That is why we have this overall impression. This poem offers thirteen snapshots of a blackbird for expanding our perceptive power. When we look at an object from one point of view, we will have only one opinion or one image, but when we look at it from different angles, then we will be able to have probably a 360-degree view of what we are looking at.

What is contrasting and unique draws our attention like the moving eye of the blackbird in unmoving snowy white mountains. That is interesting; black and white and moving and unmoving. These two are contrasted within the first stanza itself. We have as many minds and eyes as the objects in nature to see each of them individually. I consider this to be the most important aspect of Steven's poetry which is well represented in this poem.

We have millions and millions of objects; everything is there and similarly, with one eye, we can see everything individually. That means this one eye can have multiple functions to see each object differently. If we develop that kind of ability to see things differently according to their own nature, that is fantastic; that is fantastic for the world. The blackbird puts up a show as men and women do. We can see the blackbird or its shadow (or nothing) depending on our own vantage point. Poets see reality and project it to us on a screen. That is what this whole poem is something like a screen, we see the blackbird in different positions.

We have our vision only as far as the object appears. Our vision will be meaningful only till we see the object, once the object disappears, then we do not have vision of that particular object. We can imagine the objects, of course that is there.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:26)

## Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Wallace Stevens
- Imagination/ Poetry/ Poet
- “Anecdote of the Jar”
- “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”
- Analysis



To give a summary of Wallace Stevens and his poems, we can say, we have looked at the historical and literary context in which Wallace Stevens was writing against the background of the two world wars and the Great Depression among his own colleagues like Eliot, Pound, Frost, Robinson and everybody else. Most importantly, William Carlos Williams, we will see him next.

He was basically a lawyer, but he chose to write poems in his late life. He has very interesting poems. He is considered to be one of the central poets of American poetry. His role of imagination for the reader is something very interesting. The poet has to make his imagination visible, a light for the reader. We read Anecdote of the Jar and Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird focusing more on the interaction between man and nature. What is nature? what is man? We understand through the interaction between the two. But then, the interaction must be open, the perception must be flexible. That is where we have a wonderful world.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:45)

## References



- Kaelin, Eugene F. 1982. "The Fourteenth Way of Looking at a Blackbird," *New Literary History*, 14 (1): 191-203.
- Keyser, Samuel Jay. 1976. "Wallace Stevens: Form and Meaning in Four Poems," *College English*, 37 (6): 578-598.
- Pack, Robert. 2003. "Place and Nothingness in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," *Wallace Stevens Journal*, 27 (1): 97-115
- Wilkinson, Rachel A. 2006. "The Blackbird and the Quest for Meaning," *The English Journal*, 96 (1): 54-55.



We have some references. If you are interested you can see many of these and many more. We have to notice the importance of Wallace Steven's journals specifically in this reference list. There is a journal separately only for Wallace Stevens which publishes many articles on Wallace Steven's poetry and also the poetry of other poets. Thank you!