Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

SUMMARY

A vast, snow-capped mountain range looked completely still, but one thing was moving: a blackbird's eye.

My mind was split three-ways, like the presence of three blackbirds in a tree.

The autumn wind spins the blackbird through the air—and this is just one small part of the show.

A man and woman are a unified whole. And a man, woman, and blackbird are also a unified whole.

I don't know if I prefer the beauty of melodies, or the way they take on meaning in the mind. In other words, birdsong or the silence that follows.

The large window was full of spiky icicles, like frightening glass. A blackbird's shadow crossed it repeatedly. Somehow, this shadow caused a sense of foreboding.

Why do you, thin men from Haddam in Connecticut, waste your time daydreaming about golden birds, when you could be noticing the real blackbirds right in front of you—the ones walking around the women's feet.

I know about the control of words through accents and rhythms. But I also know that the blackbird is part of my knowledge too.

When the blackbird flew far away, it demonstrated the end of a range of vision—just one of many perspectives on the world.

Even people that like cheap, trite poetry would be taken aback if they saw blackbirds flying in green light.

A man was riding through Connecticut in a glass coach. One time, he was afraid—he thought the shadow of his carriage was a flock of blackbirds.

The river is flowing, and this means that the blackbird must have taken flight.

All afternoon it was dark. It had been snowing and showed no sign of letting up. The blackbird was at rest in the tree.

THEMES

PERSPECTIVE AND REALITY

As the title suggests, the poem is about different ways of seeing and perceiving the world—with the blackbird being the specific point of focus. In fact, Stevens himself called this poem a group of "sensations"—fleeting experiences that don't necessarily have an obvious meaning. Divided into thirteen short sections, each a mini-poem in its own right, the poem presents a blackbird from a different point of view (whether in a visual or intellectual sense). Some of these viewpoints are even contradictory, implicitly arguing that there is no single correct way of knowing the world, no single truth of how the world is. Instead, the way reality is perceived depends on who or what is doing the perceiving (a bit like the old cliché, *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*)—an idea the poem takes and plays with skillfully.

The poem's first section presents a natural scene in which the only moving thing "among twenty snowy mountains" is the eye of a blackbird. This vantage point is simultaneously vast *and* tiny, the mountains representing nature at its most epic and the blackbird's eye offering something much more specific. Already, then, the poem is setting up different ways of looking at the world, here zoomed-in (detailed) and zoomed-out (general). The "eye" of the blackbird might be a play on the "I" pronoun—that is, the person that each person feels themself to be. It is through this "I" that people perceive the world—thus referencing the multiple ways of "looking at" not just blackbirds, but *anything*. A useful word for this idea is *subjectivity*—when you, the *subject*, read the poem, the experience will be different from someone else's.

This subjectivity is then developed by the poem's other sections. In the third, for example, the blackbird is just one interconnected part of nature's "pantomime"—pantomimes are performances in which meaning is created through movement. A pantomime, just like the vision of a blackbird on the wind, can mean different things to different people. In the seventh section, blackbirds are presented as part of tangible reality (as opposed to something invented by the mind), whereas in the eleventh section they represent paranoia and fear: "Once, a fear pierced him, / In that he mistook / The shadow of his equipage / For blackbirds." In the seventh stanza, then, blackbirds *prove* reality, while in the eleventh they create a fictional threat.

Neither perspective is the right one, and their difference highlights that there is no one "way of looking" at anything. In other words, the blackbird can mean pretty much anything to anyone depending on the situation. This, then, presents truth not as one singular entity—but as a whole range of possibilities, all held in a kind of irresolvable tension.

The poem sometimes even lapses into statements that logically *can't* be true. This would seem to support the poem's inherent belief that there is no singular, true reality. This use of intentional nonsense is best exemplified by lines 11 and 12—"A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one"—and line 50's "It was evening all afternoon." The inability of these lines to make literal sense means the reader has to bring their own subjective

understanding to them, foregrounding the way that subjectivity itself is key to the process of meaning-making in the first place.

The poem ends by essentially returning to where it began, repositioning the blackbird in a straight-up natural image. The blackbird in the tree is at rest after the somewhat wild journey that the poem has been on, through different perspectives and feelings. The simplicity of this image seems to give the reader space to take note of all that has come before—that is, the closing image is one that doesn't really include a subject. But, given what's come before, this looks like an intentionally mischievous ending on Stevens's part—asking the reader if they really believe anything can be perceived without a subject (like the reader) to perceive it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 18-24
- Lines 25-29
- Lines 30-34
- Lines 35-37
- Lines 38-41
- Lines 42-47
- Lines 48-49
- Lines 50-54

THE NATURAL WORLD

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is a poem firmly situated in the natural world, albeit with—as the title suggests—various different perspectives. As it moves through its thirteen short sections, the poem offers a range of "sensations"(Stevens's own word) about the natural world, showcasing the way that nature isn't just one thing—it can be awe-inspiring, fearsome, beautiful, huge, and small all at once. Furthermore, the natural world of the poem represents a constant presence in human life—always there, whether noticed or not. Implicitly, then, the poem aims to remind its readers of nature's power, range, and interconnectedness, using the figure of the blackbird as a way into a more general discussion of nature.

Nature is front and center in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and not just because of the bird itself. Different aspects of the natural world appear throughout the poem, each demonstrating a different side to the natural world and humanity's place within it. The poem's discussion of nature seems focused partly on the elements (water, earth, air, and fire), with only fire missing (though the word "golden" perhaps hints at it in line 26). This helps build a picture of the natural world as something ancient and, indeed, fundamental to life itself. The first section, for example, focuses on the element *earth* through the mighty physical structures of the mountain range—nature at its most imposing.

Soon, though, the poem shifts from a wintry scene to autumn, in which the blackbird is caught up in the powerful winds (another basic element) of the season. This again showcases nature's power, but also speaks to the interdependency between different parts of nature—how the blackbird depends on air currents, for example, in order to fly. This blackbird is described as "part of the pantomime," which could be read as a reference to its place in the ecosystem.

Perhaps this unity between the different expressions of nature is at the root of the somewhat cryptic statement in the third section, in which the detached speaker says "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one." Humanity, then, for all its advances and dominance, is just as much a part of nature as the blackbird itself.

The poem even exaggerates this interconnectedness, with the speaker ascribing causality—one action setting off another in a chain—to the blackbird's movements. The sixth section emphasizes this aspect of nature while also suggesting that this causality is not something humans can fully comprehend. Here, "icicles" (line 18) are linked to the shadow of a blackbird, and line 23 links describes this shadow "an indecipherable cause." In other words, the blackbird is part of a chain of events, but this particular perspective can't quite say how.

The twelfth section reaches for a similar idea, with the fact that the "river is moving" (representing the water element) somehow indicating that the blackbird "must be flying." This could mean that the blackbird flies when the river moves, but, more surreally, could also mean that the river moves *because* the blackbird is flying. This doesn't have to be taken literally, and could be intended as a way of highlighting the interdependency of nature by deliberately overstating it.

And though nature can be a fearsome figure, as in sections ten and eleven, the poem is eager to stress the beauty of the natural world too. Indeed, in the seventh section the poem presents natural beauty as something that human creativity can't match. In this miniature scene, the blackbird walks around "the feet / of the women" unnoticed while the men "imagine golden birds." The speaker questions this, perhaps implying that the real beauty is right in front of them. The poem also highlights the beauty of the blackbird's song in the fifth section—just one small part of nature's vast range.

All in all, then, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" presents nature in its weird, wonderful, and sometimes intimidating forms. The poem subtly nudges its readers to look—and look again—at the natural world around them, and to see it afresh.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 18-24
- Lines 25-29
- Lines 30-34
- Lines 35-37
- Lines 38-41
- Lines 42-47
- Lines 48-49
- Lines 50-54

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Among twenty snowy ...
... of the blackbird.

Just as there might different paths through a forest, each bringing with it a different experience, there is no one correct way of understanding "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The clue is really in the title—there are multiple ways of looking at the world (indeed, the number thirteen seems to have been picked arbitrarily by the speaker) and accordingly the poem doesn't resolve to one single, overarching perspective on blackbirds.

Rather, the poem suggests that meaning is as much constructed by the reader's experience and understanding of the poem as anything else, which foregrounds one of main ideas: that knowledge, truth, and beauty are inevitably filtered through human perspectives (though the senses and the mind). It's worth noting again, before setting off into the depths of this poem, that Stevens's himself described it as a series of "sensations," a word that accurately describes the fleeting, elusive quality of each of the poem's thirteen sections (which Stevens also thought of as mini-poems in their own right).

If human perspective and its limitless possibilities are the poem's main theme, the first stanza also introduces the other consistent thematic focus: the natural world. The first line describes an image of epic natural scenery—indeed, twenty mountains would probably stretch the limits of human perception in terms of how much the eyes can take in.

The unrelenting /n/ and /ng/ consonance of the first two lines represents the physical and visual dominance of the mountains:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing

Line 3 contrasts the vast, imposing presence of the mountains with a much smaller—yet no less wondrous—expression of the natural world: the moving "eye of the blackbird." Amongst this vast stillness, the blackbird's eye is scouting its environment—perhaps suggesting nature's ability to adapt and survive.

Notice the way that in three short lines the poem has already set up two completely different perspectives: the telescopic vision of twenty mountains, vs. the zoomed-in perspective on the blackbird's eye. Already, then, the poem is challenging the reader to consider the fundamental role the perceiver—the person reading the poem, looking at the bird—plays in any act of perception.

LINES 4-6

I was of ...
... are three blackbirds.

The second section presents one of the poem's most cryptic moments (to that point that it might even sound like a parody of a deep though to some readers!). It's an important moment, though, introducing the first-person subject into the poem. (The word *subject* can be thought of simply as referring to a person who perceives things.) The "I" in line 4 chimes with the "eye" of line 3 (they are spelled differently but sound the same, making them homophones), and both "I" and "eye" are linked to perception and perspective.

The reader has to consider what it means to be "of three minds," as this speaker claim to be. In a simile, the speaker likens their own mental state to a tree with "three blackbirds," suggesting both a kind of unity *and* a kind of separation. That is, the three blackbirds are separate living entities, but together they form one single image—and one presence in the tree.

Again, this just reinforces the poem's core message that there are *always* multiple perspectives at play. The playful assonance of "three" (lines 4 and 6) with "tree" makes this section feel somewhat riddle-like, as if it isn't *supposed* to make literal sense.

LINES 7-8

The blackbird whirled ...
... of the pantomime.

The third section offers quite a different take from the first in terms of the blackbird's place in the natural world. Whereas the first section's perspective placed the blackbird momentarily at the *center* of nature, here the bird has less agency—it is just a "small part" of a much larger whole (and idea that, in turn, also speaks to the *interconnectedness* of the natural world—to the idea that even the smallest beings have a role to play).

In line 7, it's as though the blackbird struggles to keep a straight course in the air:

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

Look at the way that assonance, consonance, and alliteration assert their presence on the line through /b/, /l/, /d/, /w/, /n/, and /i/ sounds. The rich sounds of the line make the bird's struggle for control all the more striking, and perhaps suggests that all life depends on a delicate balance of nature's elements. The end-stop adds emphasis to the autumn winds, also subtly reinforcing the sense of their strength.

But though the winds are in a way stronger than the blackbird—if such a comparison makes sense—the second line of this section marks out the way the blackbird is still a connected part of the natural world. It is a "small part of the pantomime" (line 8), almost like a cog in a machine. This especially makes sense if the blackbird is thought of in relation to its place in the ecosystem. A "pantomime" basically means a performance, which thus also suggests that nature itself is performing, that it is putting on a show and wants to be observed—to be perceived by others.

LINES 9-12

A man and ...
... Are one.

The fourth stanza picks up on the idea of nature's interconnectedness. "A man and a woman / Are one" (a kind of unit), but the blackbird is *also* part of this unit: "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one."

The parallel structure of these lines makes them quite repetitive. The anaphora (the repeated beginnings of lines 9 and 11 with "A man and a woman") and the epistrophe (the repeated ends of each sentence ("are one") are a way for the poem to demonstrate the sense of unity that is being described. This perhaps relates to what is known as a *holistic* view of nature, which essentially says that all the individual parts of the natural world—insects, plants, animals, humans, blackbirds, and so on—are part of a whole. This could also be interpreted as a reminder that the human race, for all its technological advancement and world domination, remains part of nature, no more or less important than a blackbird.

LINES 13-17

I do not ...
... Or just after.

Section five uses juxtaposition to foreground the poem's discussion of perspective and subjectivity (that is, what it means to be an "I," to have an individual vision and understanding of the world). This juxtaposition is essentially the choice between two preferences—"the beauty of inflections" or "the beauty of innuendos"—which the speaker can't decide between.

What these two rival beauties are—if they are genuinely rivals—isn't immediately obvious, but is hinted at by lines 16 and 17. Essentially, the speaker equates the first beauty (those "inflections") with the blackbird's "whistling" song. With the word "inflections," the speaker most likely means the actual *sound* of the bird's song—its melody and rhythm. Bearing in mind that this poem is in part about how meaning is created, and "inflections" can mean something like "the blackbird's song *before* the speaker has brought their own, subjective perspective to what the song *means*." In other words, the blackbird's song before anyone actually hears it (since the act of hearing is subjective; it will be different for everyone).

In turn, then, the "beauty of innuendos" focuses on the silence that immediately follows the end of the blackbird's song—the moment in which the speaker grants it some kind of meaning. To use an innuendo is to *say* one thing but *mean* another—to make one sound, but for its meaning to lie elsewhere. The poem's focus here on beauty in relation to sound and silence could be a play on the famous lines of British Romantic poet, John Keats: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (from the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). It's also worth noting that this section uses repetitive diacope ("beauty of") to show how these two beauties are, in fact, closely related. This closeness is reflected in the sounds of the words themselves too, as both start with an /in/ sound.

LINES 18-24

Icicles filled the ...
... An indecipherable cause.

Section six is completely different in tone from the prior section. This abrupt shift is a reminder that Stevens saw this fragmented text as collection of "sensations," considering them to be individual poems as much as something whole. This difference makes sense, of course, because the poem is *about* different perspectives.

This section reads like something out of a Gothic horror novel. It seems that the speaker is looking out a tall window, through which the speaker sees sharp, dangerous-looking icicles hanging down. The speaker does not actually see a blackbird through the window, but rather just its "shadow" crossing back and forth. This adds to the sense of dread: think about how much scarier horror movies are before they show the monster, when viewers' imaginations can run wild.

Lines 18 and 19 use difficult-sounding consonance and assonance to quietly conjure an atmosphere of menace. Not the mixture of hissing /s/ sounds with lolling /l/ sound, sharp /k/ sounds, woeful /w/ sounds, resonant /b/ sounds, and short /i/ sounds:

> Icicles filled the long window
> With barbaric glass.

It's a very evocative phrase, made all the more striking because of this richness of sound. The perception of frost as "barbaric glass" is particularly weird and unsettling—but its weirdness only helps to foreground that this *observation* depends upon

the *observer* (someone else might think the icicles are beautiful!). Even though this section doesn't use the first-person pronoun, the presence of a subject—an "I"—can be detected in lines 22-24:

> The mood
> Traced in the shadow
> An indecipherable cause.

A mood—a subjective feeling—ascribes meaning to the "shadow of the blackbird," which is passing the window repeatedly (moving "to and fro"). The atmosphere is tense and paranoid, as though the subject is reading *too much* meaning into the world—drawing links (or "causes") between things that aren't really there (hence "indecipherable"). The end-stopping in lines 19 ("With barbaric glass."), 21 ("Crossed it, to and fro."), and 24 ("An indecipherable cause.") mimics both the tense state of mind *and* the appearance and re-appearance of the blackbird's shadow (in the way that the lines start and stop alternatively).

LINES 25-29

O thin men ...
... women about you?

Section eight consists of two rhetorical questions directly aimed at the "thin men of Haddam," also using apostrophe through the "O" in line 25. ("Haddam" refers to a town in Connecticut.) Once again, then, a new section of the poem marks an entirely different tone and perspective.

These might be the words of some kind of preacher-like figure, who admonishes the "thin men" (perhaps meaning that they are shallow, lacking depth) for imagining "golden birds" instead of seeing the real "blackbirds" right before them. This implies that these men have gotten something fundamentally wrong, though there is too little detail to say exactly *what* that is. Maybe the men are so concerned with wealth and prestige that they fail to appreciate the real beauty, the living nature, that "Walks around" their feet.

Perhaps this section can also be understood in terms of the imagination, and then reframed along the lines of the poem's main theme (perspective and reality). The men obviously have the ability to imagine things—that's why they can conjure up "golden birds" in their minds. The speaker doesn't seem to object to this, but more to the fact that the men fail to *also* engage with reality. It's a somewhat complex idea, but Stevens didn't necessarily believe in one single, stable reality; instead, everything is filtered through the senses of the observer. But that doesn't mean that reality—the material world and nature especially—doesn't feed into that subjectivity. Indeed, that seems to be one of the poem's main points: that the imaginative construction of wildly different "ways of seeing" is still grounded in a single, *real* thing—the blackbird.

LINES 30-34

I know noble ...
... what I know.

In section eight, the "I" perspective returns—though it's worth noting that there's nothing stable about this "I" in the different sections that it appears. That is, there's no definitive way to say that this "I" is the same person each time!

This section of the poem is arguably one of the most cryptic, but the three mentions of "know" (a form of diacope) show that the focus here is on knowledge—and perhaps on the power and limits of human knowledge.

There are different layers here to the speaker's knowledge. The speaker confidently states that they know "noble accents" and "lucid, inescapable rhythms." Perhaps here the poem is referring to the deliberate manipulation and control of language—in other words, the art of poetry! This, then, is a particularly *human* type of knowledge.

But the poem then relates this knowledge to the figure of the blackbird:

> But I know, too,
> That the blackbird is involved
> In what I know.

There's certainly no one correct way to interpret these lines, but the use of "too" indicates that the blackbird's "involvement" in what the speaker knows represents something fundamentally different from the type of knowledge referred to in lines 30 and 31 (those "noble accents" and "lucid, inescapable rhythms"). Perhaps this relates to a more instinctive, natural type of song that exists beyond the constraints of human language. It's possible that this is Stevens relating how, as a poet, he shares common ground with the blackbird—a deep-rooted desire to sing (whether on the page or in the trees).

LINES 35-37

When the blackbird ...
... of many circles.

Section nine seems closely related to section eight, in that both are about the limits of knowledge and/or perspective. It's also somewhat similar to the first section in the way it focuses on a single image, almost like a haiku (a Japanese form of poetry). Once again, though there is no "I," the poem again makes clear that there is a specific subject involved in this poem—there is a person engaged the act of perceiving. This is made clear by the opening line (line 35):

> When the blackbird flew out of sight,

For something to go "**out** of sight," if first has to be **within** sight,

within the boundaries of someone's ability to see it. Think of this is a kind of field of perspective, with a point at which the ability to see fades away. Better yet, think of it as a circle of perspective—with these limits of perfection forming "edge[s]." Indeed, the poem's reference to this single visual perspective as just one among "many circles" speaks to the way that the world is brimming with different perspectives—every living thing experiences the world in its own way. Perhaps, then, this also relates to the different sections of the poem, the spaces in between each section forming a representation of the "edge[s]" of different perceptions (Stevens's word, "sensations," also seems useful).
It's also worth noting the enjambment after "edge":

> It marked the edge
> Of one of many circles.

The word itself marks the edge of line 36.

LINES 38-41

At the sight ...
... cry out sharply.

The tenth section of the poem also relates back to section eight, with its discussion of knowledge, though the tone here is a bit more similar to the prose-like narrative sound of section six (which talked about icicles in the window and the blackbird's shadow).

As with section eight, the focus here seems to be on language and, perhaps more specifically, on poetry itself (making this poem in part *metapoetry*: poetry *about* poetry). The section present another single image (again mentioning "sight"): "blackbirds / Flying in a green light." What is this green light? It's not clear. Maybe it refers to a strange color toward the end or beginning of day. Light isn't usually green unless it's something artificial—like a traffic light. Calling attention to "green light" thus again imbues the poem with an element of weirdness, of a world that is slightly off kilter.

The speaker then refers, rather cryptically, to "the bawds of euphony." Euphony is the quality of something sounding nice to the ear, and a bawd is a woman in charge of a brothel. Perhaps this metaphorically relates to people who like pleasantness—maybe in poetry—but are afraid to experience anything too challenging (maybe Stevens's poetry itself!). Maybe it's also an ironic phrase, reducing the euphony here to something bawdy, to something raucous and cheap.

Faced with the above image, "even" these "bawds" would utter cries upon seeing the birds. Cries of what, exactly? Again, it's not clear; maybe of amazement, fear, or pleasure. In any case, the sight of the birds elicits a strong response.

LINES 42-47

He rode over ...
... For blackbirds.

The eleventh section of the poem is similar to section six (again, the one with the icicles). It's distinctly narrative in its tone (meaning it sounds less like poetry and more like prose), and has an atmosphere of disquiet and even paranoia. This subject—this perspective—is presented from a point of view known as omniscient third person. That is, the speaker is able to describe the internal feelings of the character here (a.k.a the subject/perspective).

As with section seven, this scene is set in Connecticut. Essentially, this is a mini-story, a vignette. The main character rides in carriage pulled buy horses, and mistakes the shadow of his vehicle for a flock of blackbirds. This fills the man with fear, which metaphorically "pierce[s]" him.

Here, then, the blackbird is associated with terror, darkness, and perhaps doom. Perhaps, though, the real scary thing in this section is the fear itself—the way in which it doesn't really have any tangible reason to exist. That is, there's not actual reason why this man should be so frightened. His fear can also be connected to fear of the unknown or the unexpected; the man certainly didn't anticipate seeing a swarm of birds behind his carriage.

This speaks to the human brain's capacity to sense danger sometimes when there *isn't* any, causing mental distress. It's also worth noting that the rider is in a "glass coach," suggesting the fragility of his mental state.

LINES 48-49

The river is ...
... must be flying.

The twelfth section is only two lines and nine words long. Like the first poem/section, it sounds a bit like a Japanese haiku (a short, formal poem that usually focuses on nature).

The reader is presented with two parallel sentences, which use anaphora in the repeated "The" beginnings and arguably epistrophe in the "-ing" endings of "moving" and "flying."

The parallel construction of these lines lends the section a kind the logical force of a well-made argument, which is exactly what it's going for. That is, the section gives the reader two sentences and strongly implies that they are interconnected—signalled by the word "must." That is, the implication is that *because* the "river is moving," that means that the "blackbird must be flying." Whether this is because the blackbird has some supernatural influence over the river or that it tends to fly whenever because the river is moving is ambiguous. In any case, this speaks to a sort of harmony within the natural world.

The end-stopped lines here also add to the sense of interconnectedness between the two, as if the link needs no further explanation and should be as obvious to the reader as it is to the speaker. There is no need for a conjunction or other

explanation; the connection is natural and strong.

LINES 50-54

It was evening ...
... In the cedar-limbs.

The final section ends the poem on a mysterious note, using simple language to make two statements that challenge the reader's logical understanding, before wrapping the poem up neatly on a spare and simple image of the blackbird—much like the poem began.

The first statement cannot make literal sense: "It was evening all afternoon." Afternoon and evening are distinct parts of the day—so the reader has to find some kind of *symbolic* meaning for one of the words. The end-stop that follows "afternoon" gives the reader a little pause to consider what the statement might mean. Perhaps "evening" speaks to some kind of darkness that chimes with the color of the blackbird's plumage. Or maybe the speaker is saying that it *felt* like evening—time to settle down, relax, eat supper—throughout the entire second half of the day.

Lines 51 and 52 then seem to offer some clue as to what lies behind line 50:

> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.

The repetition in these lines emphasizes the sheer snowiness of the scene being described. The use of polyptoton announces snow as something that "was" falling and something that "was going" to fall still. It's not clear if it stops snowing between these two points in time, but there's undoubtedly a lot of snow! The poem is thus returning to the wintry scenes first offered at the beginning of the poem. And if this is winter at its most intense, perhaps that's why it's "evening all afternoon"—because there is barely any sun.

Leaving the reader with these perplexing statements, the poem refocuses on the blackbird for its final image. The blackbird is at rest, having taken the reader on an incredibly wide-ranging journey through different perspectives—emphasizing the role of perspective in the making of meaning and undermining any sense that there is ever merely *one* way of looking at the world.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used here and there throughout "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." It's an important part of section three, for example:

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
> It was a small part of the pantomime.

The two /w/ sounds in line 7 convey the power of the autumn winds. The two /p/ sounds represent the blackbird's interconnected place in nature, the alliteration drawing its *own* connection between the line.

There isn't a huge amount of obvious alliteration elsewhere in the poem, but there is some in section five between the two mentions of "beauty" in lines 14 and 15 and the word "blackbird" itself. These /b/ sounds could be seen as a kind of ornamentation, evoking the idea of beauty (which is tied to perspective—beauty is in the eye of the beholder).

Another key example is in section nine:

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

This section is about different perspectives too, describing the point at which a flying blackbird can no longer be seen. The speaker imagines "many circles" of perception, and how the blackbird's flight "mark[s]" the edge of the speaker's own field of vision (perception). The two /m/ sounds are like marks on the page, mimicking the way the blackbird's black shape in the sky marks the edge of perception.

Finally, there is alliteration (specifically sibilance) in the final section of the poem, with "snowing," "snow," "sat," and "cedar." These quiet sounds bring the poem to a calm close, reflecting the quietness of the scene at hand: a bird sitting on a tree limb, surrounded by snow.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "three"
- **Line 6:** "there," "three"
- **Line 7:** "whirled," "winds"
- **Line 8:** "part," "pantomime"
- **Line 13:** "not know"
- **Line 14:** "beauty"
- **Line 15:** "beauty"
- **Line 16:** "blackbird"
- **Line 18:** "window"
- **Line 19:** "With"
- **Line 28:** "Walks"
- **Line 29:** "women"
- **Line 36:** "marked"
- **Line 37:** "many"
- **Line 42:** "Connecticut"
- **Line 43:** "coach"
- **Line 51:** "snowing"
- **Line 52:** "snow"
- **Line 53:** "sat"
- **Line 54:** "cedar"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is used in one section of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"—section seven. Here, the speaker—or, more accurately, this section's speaker—addresses the "thin men of Haddam," asking them in line 26:

> Why do you imagine golden bird?

"Haddam" is presumed to be a town in Connecticut (where Stevens lived and worked for most of his life). There is implicit criticism contained within this question, suggesting that the "men of Haddam" have lost their way. That is, the poem implies that there is something fundamentally *wrong* about the way that they "imagine golden birds" as opposed to noticing the *real* "blackbird[s]" right in front of them. The men are perhaps "thin" because they are lacking some kind of spiritual and/or intellectual understanding. They are shallow, without depth.

The second question, still part of the apostrophe, makes this criticism clear:

> Do you not see how the blackbird
> Walks around the feet
> Of the women about you?

The "thin men," then, are suffering from a lack of perspective (according to the speaker). It's worth noticing how the apostrophe mode of address makes the men seem like distant figures—the reader has to do a lot of work to imagine the details of the story.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-29:** "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?"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Generally speaking, the poem has a playful tone, taking the reader on a wild ride between different perspectives in a short space of time. The assonance definitely forms part of the sound of this playfulness.

Take the first section, for example:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing

These lines are dominated by /ee/ and short /i/ sounds, suggesting the imposing physical presence of the mountains. That is, the way the assonance makes its own presence known mirrors the way that the mountains fill up most of this visual perspective. Notice, then, how the two vowel sounds in the word "blackbird" come as a kind of shock in how *different* they are from the rest of the section's other words. This asserts the blackbird's prominent place in the poem, *and* it's place in the natural world.

Another key example of assonance is in the third section (line 7):

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.

Whereas the blackbird was front and center in the first section (even among twenty mountains!), now the blackbird is just a small "part" of nature's show. The use of short /i/ assonance, along with the assonance and consonance of /ir/ in "bird" and "whirled," conveys the way the blackbird is caught up, whirling, in those strong "winds."

Section five is an interesting example of assonance. Here, the speaker juxtaposes two different kinds of beauty—that of "inflections" and that of "innuendos." These can be thought of as pure sound ("inflections") and the meaning granted to sound by the person who perceives it ("innuendos"). Both of these are linked to the blackbird's "whistling," which contains the same "in" sound (the /n/ counts as consonance, not assonance). Accordingly, both beauties are with*in* the blackbird's song (within that "whistling").

Section six also features prominent assonance. "Barbaric glass" (line 19) has an intentionally harsh sound, conveying the uneasy disquiet of the phrase. Then, when the speaker describes the recurring presence of the blackbird's shadow, the poem uses repeated long /o/, /aw/, and /oo/ assonance:

> The shadow of the blackbird
> Crossed it, to and fro.
> The mood
> Traced in the shadow
> An indecipherable cause.

The various vowel sounds come and go through these lines, mimicking the way the blackbird's shadow keeps crossing the window.

Another example to make note of is in the twelfth section:

> The river is moving.
> The blackbird must be flying.

Notice how the uniform vowel sounds in the first line above (line 48) give the line a forward motion like the flow of a river. The following line echos this too. There's a more abstract reason for this assonance too. The poem is presenting these two statements—the moving river and the blackbird flying—as logically connected. The assonance reinforces this connection, making it sound subtly more convincing.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "twenty snowy"
- **Line 2:** "only moving thing"
- **Line 4:** "three"
- **Line 5:** "tree"
- **Line 6:** "three"
- **Line 7:** "blackbird whirled," "in," "winds."
- **Line 9:** "man," "and," "woman"
- **Line 10:** "one"
- **Line 11:** "man," "and," "woman," "and"
- **Line 12:** "one"
- **Line 14:** "inflections"
- **Line 15:** "innuendoes"
- **Line 16:** "whistling"
- **Line 18:** "Icicles filled," "window"
- **Line 19:** "barbaric glass."
- **Line 20:** "shadow," "of"
- **Line 21:** "Crossed," "to," "fro"
- **Line 22:** "mood"
- **Line 23:** "shadow"
- **Line 24:** "cause"
- **Line 26:** "do you," "imagine golden"
- **Line 27:** "Do you"
- **Line 30:** "know noble"
- **Line 33:** "is involved"
- **Line 34:** "In"
- **Line 38:** "sight"
- **Line 39:** "Flying in," "light"
- **Line 40:** "euphony"
- **Line 41:** "sharply"
- **Line 42:** "rode over"
- **Line 43:** "coach"
- **Line 44:** "fear pierced"
- **Line 48:** "river is moving"
- **Line 49:** "flying"
- **Line 51:** "snowing"
- **Line 52:** "going," "snow"
- **Line 53:** "blackbird sat"

CONSONANCE

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is full of consonance, with some instances more significant than others. It's a strong presence in the first section:

> Among twenty snowy mountains,
> The only moving thing
> Was the eye of the blackbird.

Notice how the consonance makes the first two lines sound quite uniform, as though the words represent the way that this particular visual perspective is dominated by the mountains. This means that the sound of the third line—which is like the blackbird's entry onto the stage of the poem—offers a kind of release to the sounds established in the first two. The blackbird, then, has its own special place in the poem's sound—conveying the way that it is the only thing moving in this grand, sweeping vista.

Section three is also full of consonance:

> The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
> It was a small part of the pantomime.

Here, however, there is a greater variety of consonant sounds, and more of them chime with sounds within the word "blackbird." This evokes the interconnectedness of the different parts of the natural world.

Section six uses harsh consonances in its first two lines (lines 18 and 19 of the overall poem) to conjure up a quietly threatening atmosphere:

> Icicles filled the long window
> With barbaric glass.

These sounds seem to stick in the throat, conveying a kind of sharpness that matches with the look of the icicles. Note, also, the way that "barbaric" chimes with "blackbird" in terms of its /b/ and hard /k/ sounds. This links the "barbaric" sense of threat with the shadow of the "blackbird." In other words, it shows a perspective at work, drawing ominous information from the visual world.

In the following section, /n/ sounds are also used to create a link between words (other consonance is also highlighted):

> O thin men of Haddam,
> Why do you imagine golden birds?

The /n/ sounds joins the "thin men" with their act of imagining "golden birds." Their thinness is thus presented as a kind of spiritual or intellectual malnourishment, the speaker admonishing them for not appreciating the real blackbirds at their feet (it's important to stress that this isn't anti-imagination, but rather against the ignorance of reality).

The tenth section uses consonance to conjure up a sense of "euphony," of sounds chiming together (through "blackbirds," "bawds," and "would"). The speaker isn't praising this kind of euphony, but suggesting that it's kind of cheap or tacky—that's why these sounds aren't particularly beautiful (though it's important to stress that this is intentionally subjective, with beauty being in the eye and ear of the reader!).

The eleventh section returns to harsh sounds that hark back to the tense atmosphere of section six (lines 42-47). "Connecticut," "coach," "mistook," and "equipage" all chime with the hard /k/ of blackbird—building a sense of threat linked to

the figure of the blackbird itself.

The final section uses softer /n/ and /ng/ sounds (e.g. "evening" and "snowing") to give the lines a kind of muted tone, evoking the way that snow turns a landscape into uniform white.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing"
- **Line 3:** "blackbird"
- **Line 6:** "there," "three blackbirds"
- **Line 7:** "blackbird whirled," "in," "autumn winds"
- **Line 8:** "small," "part," "pantomime"
- **Line 9:** "man and," "woman"
- **Line 10:** "one"
- **Line 11:** "man and," "woman," " and," "blackbird"
- **Line 12:** "one"
- **Line 13:** "not know"
- **Line 14:** "beauty of inflections"
- **Line 15:** "beauty of innuendoes"
- **Line 16:** "blackbird whistling"
- **Line 17:** "just after"
- **Line 18:** "Icicles," " filled," "long window"
- **Line 19:** "barbaric glass"
- **Line 20:** "shadow ," "blackbird"
- **Line 21:** "it," "to and fro"
- **Line 22:** "mood"
- **Line 23:** "in"
- **Line 24:** "An," "indecipherable"
- **Line 25:** "thin men"
- **Line 26:** " imagine golden birds"
- **Line 27:** "blackbird"
- **Line 28:** "Walks"
- **Line 29:** "women"
- **Line 30:** "know noble accents"
- **Line 31:** "And lucid"
- **Line 33:** "That the," "blackbird," "involved"
- **Line 34:** "In," "know"
- **Line 35:** "blackbird," "out," "sight"
- **Line 36:** "marked," " edge"
- **Line 37:** "Of one of many," "circles."
- **Line 38:** "At," "sight," "blackbirds"
- **Line 39:** "in," "green light"
- **Line 40:** "Even," "bawds," "euphony"
- **Line 41:** "Would"
- **Line 42:** "Connecticut"
- **Line 43:** "coach."
- **Line 44:** "Once," "pierced"
- **Line 45:** "mistook"
- **Line 46:** "equipage"
- **Line 47:** "blackbirds"
- **Line 48:** "river," "moving"
- **Line 49:** "blackbird," "flying"
- **Line 50:** "evening," "afternoon"
- **Line 51:** "snowing"
- **Line 52:** "going," "snow"
- **Line 53:** "blackbird sat"
- **Line 54:** "cedar-limbs"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used throughout "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Part of this is essentially built into the poem's fragmented form. Each section ends with a full-stop, giving the reader a little moment of pause in which to consider the meaning of the section that has just finished. It's also worth noting that three of these section endings actually end on the word "blackbird," underscoring the bird's central role as the poem's focal point.

The end-stopping serves other purposes too. In section four, for example, both sentences end with the same word ("one") *and* an end-stop. This signifies a kind of steady unity, which is in line with this section's strange statement that a man, woman, and blackbird are all "one." In section five, the end-stop after line 17 ("Or just after.") means that the poem enters a brief moment of silence—which is exactly what the speaker is describing in the phrase "beauty of innuendos." This is the moment *after* a sound when the listener can ascribe meaning to it (in this case, to the blackbird's whistle).

The end-stopping in the penultimate section is also significant:

> The river is moving.
> The blackbird must be flying.

The two end-stops are intended to imply a logical link between these two statements. The river is moving, and *therefore* the blackbird must be in flight. The end-stop actually highlights the *lack* of explanation of the link between these two statements, reminding the reader that it is up to them to make sense of it—to bring their own subjective perception to the poem.

Finally, the end-stops in the last section are used to bring the poem to a rest, mimicking the way that the blackbird itself comes to a pause "in the cedar-limbs."

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mountains,"
- **Line 3:** "blackbird."
- **Line 6:** "blackbirds."
- **Line 7:** "winds."
- **Line 8:** "pantomime."
- **Line 10:** "one."
- **Line 12:** "one."
- **Line 13:** "prefer,"
- **Line 15:** "innuendoes,"
- **Line 17:** "after."

- **Line 19:** “glass.”
- **Line 21:** “fro.”
- **Line 24:** “cause.”
- **Line 25:** “Haddam,”
- **Line 26:** “birds?”
- **Line 29:** “you?”
- **Line 31:** “rhythms;”
- **Line 32:** “too,”
- **Line 34:** “know.”
- **Line 35:** “sight,”
- **Line 37:** “circles.”
- **Line 39:** “light,”
- **Line 41:** “sharply.”
- **Line 43:** “coach.”
- **Line 44:** “him,”
- **Line 47:** “blackbirds.”
- **Line 48:** “moving.”
- **Line 49:** “flying.”
- **Line 50:** “afternoon.”
- **Line 52:** “s,” “now.”
- **Line 54:** “cedar-limbs.”

ENJAMBMENT

There's enjambment throughout "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The poem is generally loose in terms of structure, and the mixture of end-stop and enjambment adds to the unpredictable nature of the poem.

In the first section, notice how the enjambment plays with the sentence's grammatical sense:

> The only moving thing
> Was the eye of the blackbird.

This creates a sensation of movement in the poem, in turn emphasizing the small but deliberate movement of the blackbird's eye. Indeed, the reader's eye itself has to move to complete the sentence, mimicking what's being described.

Another significant enjambment is in section 4:

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

This makes the second and fourth lines of the section (lines 10 and 12 in the overall poem) identical, reinforcing the sense of unity being described here. If this section aims to highlight the interconnectedness of nature—including humankind—the identical lines strengthens that idea.

In the fifth section (lines 13-17), enjambment supports the juxtaposition between different types of beauty—"inflections" vs. "innuendos." Just as the two beauties have their own lines, so too do the ways that the speaker *relates* to these two beauties: "whistling" (inflection) is on its own line, and the moment "just after" the whistling (innuendo) is also given separate space.

Section nine's enjambment is simple but effective:

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

Breaking the line after "edge" creates a *visual* edge in the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “thing / Was”
- **Lines 5-6:** “tree / In”
- **Lines 9-10:** “woman / Are”
- **Lines 11-12:** “blackbird / Are”
- **Lines 14-15:** “inflections / Or”
- **Lines 16-17:** “whistling / Or”
- **Lines 18-19:** “window / With”
- **Lines 20-21:** “blackbird / Crossed”
- **Lines 22-23:** “mood / Traced”
- **Lines 23-24:** “shadow / An”
- **Lines 30-31:** “accents / And”
- **Lines 33-34:** “involved / In”
- **Lines 36-37:** “edge / Of”
- **Lines 38-39:** “blackbirds / Flying”
- **Lines 40-41:** “euphony / Would”
- **Lines 42-43:** “Connecticut / In”
- **Lines 45-46:** “mistook / The”
- **Lines 46-47:** “equipage / For”
- **Lines 51-52:** “snowing / And”
- **Lines 53-54:** “sat / In”

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is used in section five of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This section lays out two different types of beauty, and explains how the blackbird relates to these two categories. It's also worth noting that the speaker is undecided about which type of beauty to prefer. This indecision reminds the reader that the poem is about *perspective*.

The first beauty is that "of inflections." An inflection here essentially relates to a kind of melody (inflection in speech is the way in which the pitch goes up or down). The speaker ties this type of beauty together conceptually with the blackbird's "whistling." Think of this as being the *experience* of the blackbird's song without any thought given to what the song *means*. Essentially, it's the raw sensory data of sound (though it can easily apply to other senses too).

The speaker then juxtaposes this inflection-based beauty with

the "beauty of innuendos." Innuendos are *implied* meanings that rely on a mutual understanding between the speaker and the person listening. For example, if someone said that "Bill is not the *best* basketball player," they probably mean Bill is actually really bad—not simply that he isn't the very best in the world. *This* type of beauty, then, is all about perception and subjectivity—the way that a person creates meaning from their experiences. This actually takes place in the *silence* "just after" the blackbird's whistle.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-17:** "I do not know which to prefer, / The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after."

METAPHOR

Much of the poem can be understood metaphorically, but there are a few particularly striking examples of distinct metaphors.

The first example is in section three. Here, the blackbird is described as a "small part of the pantomime." The poem doesn't define just what the "pantomime" actually is, but given that the previous line talks about "autumn winds," it seems like this word applies to the natural world. A pantomime, of course, is a kind of show/performance. The poem is probably referring more to the classical idea of pantomime which originated in Ancient Rome. Performers in these shows expressed meaning through movement. So, then, the poem appears to be referring to the way that human beings perceive meaning in the natural world, while also gesturing towards the interconnectedness of all living things (which is why the blackbird is just one "small part").

Another clear metaphor comes in line 44, when the poem says "a fear pierced him." Fear can't *literally* pierce something. Instead, this metaphor reveals how just the thought of seeing blackbirds gives this man riding in the coach a sudden, sharp pang of terror.

It's worth noting that lines 18-19 ("Icicles ... glass") could also be interpreted as metaphor, but this passage is discussed in the personification section of the guide.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "It was a small part of the pantomime."
- **Lines 18-19:** "Icicles filled the long window / With barbaric glass."
- **Line 44:** "a fear pierced him"
- **Line 50:** "It was evening all afternoon."

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used once in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This occurs in section six:

> Icicles filled the long window
> With barbaric glass.
> The shadow of the blackbird
> Crossed it, to and fro.

This section transforms the "icicles" on the window through personification and metaphor. The icicles look like "glass," but this glass itself looks "barbaric." Of course, barbarism is a word that doesn't apply literally to inanimate objects. Only humans can be barbaric—meaning brutal, uncultured, and violent. The poem doesn't dwell on this personification, and so the reader has to bring their own imagination into play to consider how icicles can be barbaric. That is, the reader must think about which qualities icicles have in common with barbaric humanity.

This seems to speak to a kind of threatening atmosphere of potential violence. The icicles look like sharp, spiky weapons tapping on the window. This section of the poem is narrative, and implies that someone is seeing the shadow of blackbirds as an ominous symbol. The frightening appearance of icicles in the window contributes to this sense of fear and foreboding.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "barbaric glass"

REPETITION

Repetition is an important element of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and comes in numerous forms.

The poem's key word—"blackbird"—appears in all thirteen sections. This has a unifying effect, gluing the different parts of the poem (which, it's worth noting, Stevens saw as distinct poems in and of themselves) together. Each new section brings with it the anticipation of the repeated word, drawing the reader into the poem and casting a kind of hypnotic spell. Having a constant element throughout the sections also allows the poem to show just how many different ways there are of seeing one individual thing, an effect which would be lost if that thing (that is, the blackbird) were to change.

Section four uses both anaphora and epistrophe in its two sentences. That is, both start the same way (anaphora) and end the same way (epistrophe):

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

The similarity of the sentences creates a kind of unity that matches with the description of a man, woman, and blackbird all being part of some greater whole (with that whole perhaps being the natural world).

Section five uses diacope in its repeat of "beauty" (lines 14 and

15), which helps the section lay out its juxtaposition between "inflections" and "innuendos." It also links these two concepts together under the broader concepts of beauty. Section eight then uses the word "know" in three of its five lines, in alternating lines from line 30 ("I know ..."). This places strong emphasis on another concept—knowledge.

Section thirteen uses anaphora again, which helps with a playful change in tense:

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

Notice how the three "it was" constructions contrast with the simple verb in the last sentence—"The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs." This marks the blackbird out as an image of stillness compared with the constant movement of the snow. Indeed, this latter movement is drawn out further through another repetitive device: polyptoton. This relates to the way that "snowing" chimes with a word from the same root, "snow"—which emphasizes the vast blanket of white that is cast all over the scene.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "blackbird"
- **Line 4:** "three"
- **Line 6:** "three blackbirds"
- **Line 7:** "blackbird"
- **Lines 9-12:** "A man and a woman / Are one. / A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one."
- **Line 14:** "The ," "beauty of inflections"
- **Line 15:** "Or the ," "beauty of innuendoes"
- **Line 16:** "The ," "blackbird"
- **Line 17:** "Or"
- **Line 20:** "blackbird"
- **Line 27:** "blackbird"
- **Line 30:** "know"
- **Line 32:** "know"
- **Line 33:** "blackbird"
- **Line 34:** "know"
- **Line 35:** "blackbird"
- **Line 38:** "blackbirds"
- **Line 47:** "blackbirds"
- **Line 48:** "The"
- **Line 49:** "The," "blackbird"
- **Line 50:** "It was"
- **Line 51:** "It was," "snowing"
- **Line 52:** "it was," "snow"
- **Line 53:** "blackbird"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There are two rhetorical questions in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and both of these are found in section seven:

> 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?

This section has a markedly different tone from the others, and sees an unspecified speaker admonishing the "thin men of Haddam" (probably a reference to a town in Connecticut). The speaker's two rhetorical questions reveal a kind of value system at work: the "thin men" prefer to "imagine golden birds," while the speaker believes they would be better of noticing the *real* blackbirds walking on the floor. There isn't enough detail to say *why* the speaker views the world in this way, but it does draw parallels with the warnings against false idolatry (the worshipping of idols) in the Bible and other religious texts. The speaker seems to be making a case not against the imagination per se, but *for* the role that reality has to play in the imagination and the creative act.

The poem is about different ways of seeing the world—but the world is at the heart of all of these perspectives. Perhaps, then, this a reference to the richness and variety of experience—arguing that the "thin men" should embrace what's right in front of them instead of wanting to escape it.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-29:** "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?"

VOCABULARY

Pantomime (Line 8) - A performance using movement, with its roots in ancient Roman culture.

Inflections (Line 14) - Variations in pitch (the low/high quality of a sound), particularly in relation to voice or music.

Innuendoes (Line 15) - Remarks with an implied meaning that is not literally obvious.

Barbaric (Line 19) - Cruel, primitive, and violent.

To and Fro (Line 21) - Backwards and forwards, or side-to-side.

Indecipherable (Line 24) - Impossible to solve/understand.

Lucid (Line 31) - Clear and easy to understand.

Bawds (Line 40) - Women in charge of a brothel. Also appears

as an adjective in Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream."

Euphony (Line 40) - Sounds that are pleasing to the ear.

Haddam (Line 42) - A town in the poet's home state of Connecticut.

Equipage (Line 46) - Carriage and horse.

Cedar-limbs (Line 54) - The branches of a cedar tree.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As its name suggests, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is made up of thirteen different stanzas or mini-poems, which Stevens called "sensations." These sensations contain from two to seven lines, and are all preceded by a Roman numeral.

Consider how many sensations a person feels every day without necessarily figuring out the meaning of each one—similarly, this isn't a poem meant to *solve* or *answer* something, but rather to savor and enjoy. Clearly, Stevens intended to create thirteen different worlds held together by the common presence of the blackbird—the unifying figure—and it's up to reader to bring their own subjectivity (their perspective) to the poem. The reader's role in the creation of meaning in relation to poetry is thus placed front and center, and the ways in which different perspectives can produce different meanings is represented by the multiple and even contradictory ways of "looking at a blackbird" presented in the poem.

In the first and last stanzas, Stevens situates the blackbird in a natural setting. Many critics have noted the similarity in tone between these sections—and the poem more generally—to the Japanese haiku form. This said, there isn't much supporting evidence for this claim (even if making the link is tempting). Perhaps the similarity between these two stanzas signifies the way that the blackbird takes the reader on a journey through different perspectives, eventually returning to the same wintry scene to mark the journey as complete.

What's also worth noting is the drastically different tones that appear throughout the poem, the fragmentation of the thirteen sections allowing the poem to make abrupt turns in speaker, subject, grammar, and so on. Sections four ("A man and a woman ..." and twelve ("The river is moving. ..") are so minimal as to become almost riddle-like, while section five ("I do not know ...") seems much more personal. Sections six ("Icicles filled ...") and eleven ("He rode over Connecticut ...") are more like gothic narratives in miniature. All in all, the variety throughout the thirteen sections underscores the poem's suggestion that there is no one, true reality; rather, there are multiple perspectives on reality (and reality can never be perceived without someone or something there to perceive it).

METER

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" doesn't have a metrical scheme. This is a poem written in free verse, though it's worth noting that the line length is kept relatively short throughout.

That said, this doesn't mean the poem doesn't have *any* instances of metrical effects. The first section of the poem (lines 1-3) is particularly interesting:

> Among | twenty | snowy | mountains,
> The on- | ly mov- | ing thing
> Was the eye | of the blackbird.

It's possible to read the first line as trochees (DUM-da) with an iambic first foot on "Among" (da-DUM). The second line is then totally iambic. The first two lines, then, sound pretty regular in terms of meter—suggesting the still and steady sight of the mountain range. The third line feels more disjointed rhythmically, perhaps suggesting small but perceptible movement (like the eye itself).

In the twelfth section, both lines (48-49) end with a trochee:

> ... moving.
> ... flying.

This subtly reinforces these two sentences as logically connected by giving them a similar sound.

RHYME SCHEME

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" doesn't use rhyme. The poem is about different "ways of looking"—that is, different perspectives—and is basically made up of a bunch of mini-poems. With this in mind, a strict rhyme scheme would probably feel too neat and unified for the poem's subject matter.

There *is* a slant rhyme between lines 40 and 41:

> Even the bawds of euphony
> Would cry out sharply.

Here, the poem implicitly (and playfully) criticizes "bawds of euphony." This may be a reference to poetry that is too simple and trite in its rhyming, and the slight rhyme could be a subtle way of pocking fun at this style. Of course, that's just one interpretation!

SPEAKER

There is no one stable speaker in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Instead, the poem seems to jump between speakers, reflecting its idea that there are always multiple

perspectives on a scene.

Sometimes, the voice sounds like a detached observer. This is the case in the first and last sections, where the poem's focus is on nature. There is no "I" in these moments—but then an "I" *does* appear in sections two, five, and eight. In truth, though, there is nothing to suggest that these all refer to the *same* person, though. The "I" who is "of three minds" might not be the same "I" who thinks about "which beauty to prefer." Section seven then seems like it's in its own special category, especially as it takes the form of rhetorical questioning, whereas sections six and eleven sound more like the narrative voice from horror fiction—that is, they sound like some omniscient narrator describing the scene at hand. All in all, then, there's no single voice guiding the poem, and that's part of the point. The poem is about different ways of seeing the world, and each section presents a different perspective.

SETTING

Generally speaking, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" feels like it is set in the natural world. However, as with the poem's speaker, the setting changes—sometimes abruptly—from section to section.

The poem begins and ends with a wintry scene full of snow. In the first section, the opening image of a broad mountain range suddenly zooms in on the blackbird's eye. The setting, then, is being used as a way of contrasting the different scales and sizes of the natural world. Section three mentions a tree, while in section four the blackbird "whirl[s] in the autumn winds." There's something quite elemental about the poem's beginning, then. Other sections that fit with these are sections twelve and thirteen, and to a lesser degree section nine. All in all, they give the impression of a sparse environment in which the blackbird is the main point of focus. And bringing the poem back round to an image of snow in the end suggests that the blackbird's journey—which takes the reader through thirteen different perspectives—has also come to an end.

Sections six and eleven are markedly different from the rest of the poem, however, and read as if they are set in some kind of gothic novel. This contributes to the poem's discussion of perspective and subjectivity, showing how the blackbird can be a frightening or threatening figure depending on who perceives it. This contrasts with more natural sections mentioned above, in which the blackbird seems more in tune with its surroundings, rather than a sign that something bad is going to happen.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wallace Stevens is one of the greatest American poets of the 20th century, whom literary critic Harold Bloom called the "best and most representative" American writer of the era. He is generally considered part of the Modernist tradition, though his output is so singular that it doesn't really fit in with other Modernist figures like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Instead, Stevens is often linked with Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although Stevens lived almost a century after these writers, he shares many of their concerns, most particularly the belief that an individual's imagination shapes their experience of the world. This emphasis on subjective experience—and on how perspective shapes meaning—is crucial to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Like these writers, Stevens was interested in using poetry not only to exercise his imagination, but also to think through his ideas. In this lineage, Stevens also shares affinities with his contemporary Hart Crane, another Modernist poet with Romantic leanings.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" was published in *Harmonium* (1923), Stevens's debut collection. This book was not a great success initially, but has since found a reputation as one of the key poetry collections of the twentieth century. This poem is not an exception in the way that it resists providing the reader with a straightforward interpretation. Stevens described the poem as a collection of "sensations," and as a "group of poems" (which suggests they can be taken separately *and* as a whole).

Critics debate the meaning of other famous Stevens's poems—such as "The Snowman," "The Emperor of Ice Cream," and "Sunday Morning"—just as much as this one. That said, the poem's elusiveness shouldn't be conflated with difficulty, but as a sign of Stevens's wide-ranging imagination and playful inventiveness. This poem's fragmented form—its division into sections—also crops up elsewhere in *Harmonium*. "Architecture," "The Apostrophe to Vincentine," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," and even the aforementioned "Sunday Morning" challenge the reader to make interpretive connections across different sections of the poem.

With its focus on the blackbird, Stevens's poem further fits within long and rich line of poetry about birds. British Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley often featured birds in their work. And if you think about their ability to fly, sing, and their visual attractiveness, birds seem open to a wide range of symbolic interpretation—just as this poem stresses throughout. Bird poems worth comparison are Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover," and perhaps even Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (indeed, sections six and eleven here are quite gothic in atmosphere).

It's worth noting that "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is often compared to the famous Japanese poetic form, the haiku. Stevens's poem does share common ground in its sparse mode of expression and the frequent focus on nature, but there isn't much evidence to suggest that Stevens was specifically interested in Japanese forms. That said, the Modernist era did see an increasing amount of poets turning to Japanese and Chinese art for inspiration.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with many Stevens poems, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" isn't really grounded in one specific sense of place or time. Published between the two World Wars, there's little in the poem to suggest that this poem takes place in the 20th century. Indeed, the poem creates a kind of ahistorical atmosphere in some of its settings. The first section, for example, could take place at pretty much any time in the history of the world.

The name "blackbird" applies to numerous species of birds. Stevens is probably thinking of the New World blackbird, which in itself is a catch-all term relating to species found primarily in North America as opposed to Europe or Asia (the Common blackbird). The blackbird has featured in human cultural activity for centuries. In classical Greece, for example, it was seen as a symbol of destruction (which, arguably, sections six and eleven in this poem agree with). In Europe, blackbirds were often hunted and, as the old nursery rhyme goes, "baked in a pie." With this in mind, though, it's worth noting that the blackbird has got off pretty lightly in terms of not becoming a general symbol of bad luck. Crows and ravens, for example, are associated with foreboding and darkness.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Bloom on Stevens — Audio of a fascinating lecture on Stevens by Harold Bloom, one of the most influential literary critics of the 20th century. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUJXWgOOZOM)
- The Thrilling Mind of Wallace Stevens — An interesting article about Stevens's life and work. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/02/the-thrilling-mind-of-wallace-stevens)
- A Reading of the Poem — Tom O'Bedlam reads "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnUCNwxyf3s)
- Birds and Poetry — A short but excellent selection of bird-related poems. (https://interestingliterature.com/2017/02/10-of-the-best-poems-about-birds/)
- The Blackbird's Song — A full meditative hour of blackbird singing. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmpEWImgRxQ)
- The Poet's Life and Work — A bountiful resource from the Poetry Foundation, including podcasts, essays, and more poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wallace-stevens)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALLACE STEVENS POEMS

- The Emperor of Ice-Cream

HOW TO CITE

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