The Idea of Order at Key West | Introduction by Effie Ke

Written in 1934, “The Idea of Order at Key West” remains one of the most difficult poems by one of America’s most difficult poets. Yet, it stands as one of Stevens’ most anthologized poems, and according to most critics of his work, it is one of his best. Stevens must have liked it as well, as he made it the title poem in his 1936 collection, *Ideas of Order*. As widely praised as the poem is, no authoritative reading has emerged. Indeed, there are as many different interpretations of the poem as there are readers of it.

One of the great ironies of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” is that for a complex poem, its plot is rather simple. An unnamed speaker is walking along the beach of Key West and hears a woman singing a song. The song enchants the listener/speaker, and as the woman is singing, he begins to muse on the beauty of her song and its relationship to his own life, particularly his ideas on reality and imagination. Finally, after listening and thinking, the speaker experiences a kind of epiphany, a moment of insight. While few would question these basic facts of the poem, the debate takes place around what Stevens thinks of the song and what kind of epiphany he experiences.

While the poem remains too complex to be easily explicated or paraphrased here, it is accurate to say that the poem dramatizes important conflicts for Stevens: imagination and reality, presence and absence, order and chaos, nature and civilization, the mind and the body. While readers never see the female singer or actually hear what it is the woman is singing, they experience what the speaker of the poem experiences: transformation. The woman’s song transforms the speaker’s experience of walking along the beach, and, what’s more, when he returns to town, he discovers that his perception of Key West has also been altered. Early critics cite the poem as an example of Stevens championing the creative process, but that is inaccurate, according to most recent criticism. These critics believe that the poem is about the need for poetry and the need for art. Thus, the emphasis of the poem is not so much on the song itself but what the song does to the listener. One can extend that, of course, to Stevens’ hope for his own poetry—that it has the same effect on his readers as the song does on the speaker of the poem.

Taken from http://www.enotes.com/idea-order

Notes to "The Idea of Order at Key West"

After his first collection of poetry Stevens gradually turned away from the descriptive and dramatic modes towards the discursive and the more immediately philosophical. The later poems were much more involuted than the earlier ones, their idioms no longer spry and balletic but, on the contrary, spare - or even austere. The change was not a complete one, of course: Stevens was simply developing certain ideas expressed in his first published work, and then investigating their intricacies. Nor was it irreversible: in some ways, a poem like 'The Man With the Blue Guitar' still recalls the witty and idiosyncratic verse of """Harmonium""", as do many of the sections of """Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction""". But as a general tendency it is clear enough;

and well illustrated by this meditation, which supplied the centre piece to Stevens's second volume. In it, the poet describes a woman whom he once heard, singing beside the sea (a traditional figure for raw experience) at Key West, in the Straits of Florida. Slowly, she becomes identified for him with the 'blessed rage for order': the need which singer, poet, and all men alike feel to discover form and meaning in their lives.

Title] the coral island in the Florida keys southwest of the southern tip of the state, a vacation spot especially attractive to artists and writers.

1-4] The woman, the poet tells us, sang a song which was beyond the compass of the sea itself, because the sea was without intelligent or articulate forms as we know them. The sea was 'Like a body wholly body': an object possessing neither head nor even hands with which to express itself to us. Note the extraordinary plangency of this verse. The use of alliteration, assonance, and verbal repetition is characteristically elaborate; and each line, a cunning combination of iambs and trochees, seems to roll forward and then fall back like the sea it describes. The entire poem repeats this to and fro movement. Words, phrases, and metaphors recur, accumulating meanings; ideas continually reappear; and slowly the poem seems to work its way into our minds, like the sea creeping insidiously up the shore.

4-7] And yet the movements of the sea seemed to offer something that 'we' could interpret after our fashion. The cry of the ocean, its genuine voice, was alien to 'us': but 'we' could abstract from it 'our' own songs and meanings. 'We', here and throughout the rest of the poem, refers to the poet as Everyman: thus including us, his audience, along with himself.

8] This probably means that the sea was not simply being used, in the woman's song, as a means of projecting her own emotions: she was not just trying to impose her own ideas on her circumstances. Nor, on the other hand, was she merely a means by which the reality of the sea could announce itself.

9-15] The song did not merely consist of the sound of the woman's voice mingling with the sound of the water. Even if her song was an expression of the ocean sounds she heard it was different from them because it was an attempt to give articulate form to them. In her song the woman was abstracting from reality, transforming chaotic sound into intelligible words.

16-17] The mysterious ('ever hooded') sea, tragic because it seemed to deny our 'rage for order', was merely the place where the woman sang: the reality upon which her imagination chose to work.

18-20] It was not the woman but the 'spirit' embodied in her that we sought, the imaginative faculty she possessed and represented.

21-8] If the song had merely been a means by which the reality of the sea, and its surroundings, could announce themselves; then the only sounds to be heard would have been the resonant ('deep') echoes of the waves, pounding against the shore, and other ocean noises in a semi tropical climate (where it is 'summer

without end').

28-33) But her song was more than these alien and meaningless noises; more than just her voice, and ours, mingling with the chaotic sights and sounds of wind, water, and sea shadows ('bronze shadows'). Note the accumulative pattern of the syntax here, each clause or phrase 'building' upon its predecessor: the poet is preparing us for the major statement of belief to be made in the next paragraph.

33-42] This is the dramatic climax of the poem. The song sung by the woman, the poet tells us, was an imaginative transformation of her surroundings. It was HER voice, creating a fiction, which gave special point to the sunset. It was SHE who, by endowing the moment with an atmosphere of solitude, gave to it a unique emotional tone. SHE made the world or 'mundo' in which she sang; and when she sang the sea, becoming a part of that 'mundo', assumed an identity which SHE had helped to give to it. Even as we watched, we realized that the world where she lived, and received her satisfactions, was a world that SHE alone had contrived to create.

43] ""Ramon Fernandez"" : 'I used two everyday names. As I might have expected they turned out to be an actual name.' (Stevens.) The 'actual name' belonged to a French critic, to whose aesthetic theory Stevens' own idea of the imagination bears some resemblance; and of whom, Stevens later admitted, he did have some knowledge.

44-50] The discovery made in the preceding verse paragraph is now gradually generalized. The first stage in this process is to introduce a fresh example of the 'rage for order'. As the poet turned his attention away from the woman by the sea, he tells us, he noticed the lights of the fishing boats in a nearby harbour. These lights seemed to arrange the surrounding night just as the woman's song had seemed to arrange the sea. They endowed the surrounding darkness with a moral ('deepening') and an aesthetic ('enchanting') dimension which it would not otherwise have had.

51-55] The second stage in the generalizing process is to move from these two (respectively major and minor) examples of the 'rage for order' to a direct affirmation of belief; of the kind which was to become ever more frequent in Stevens' later verse. It is this, the desire felt by all human beings to give some intelligible form to their lives, which allows them, and us, an entry ('portals') into the kind of pleasurable experience just described. The experience must be an evanescent ('dimly starred') one, since our fictions quickly die, But it has the value of telling us SOMETHING about ourselves and our environment (because it depends upon both); and giving us finer ('ghostlier') definitions of our world in 'keener', more cruelly sweet, designs (such as those of song and poetry).

(Richard Gray, American Poetry of the Twentieth Century)

Taken from <http://mb.sparknotes.com/mb.epl?b=121&m=546489&h=west,order,key,idea>.