

WALLACE STEVENS' NATURE RELIGION

Agama Semesta Ciptaan Wallace Stevens

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INTISARI

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan pandangan, kepercayaan, dan sikap Amerika terhadap agama semesta sebagaimana terlihat dalam tiga puisi Wallace Stevens yang berjudul: "Sunday Morning", "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird", dan "The Idea of Order at Key West".

Penelitian ini dilaksanakan dengan studi pustaka yang memfokuskan perhatian pada sumber-sumber referensi yang berkaitan dengan topik yang dibicarakan. Penelitian dengan sudut pandang Kajian Amerika ini menggunakan pendekatan interdisipliner. Dengan melibatkan pendekatan filsafat, agama, sosiologi, dan sejarah peneliti mencoba menunjukkan bahwa agama semesta telah mendapat simpati yang mendalam sejak Amerika menyadari bahwa tradisi Kristen tak mampu memenuhi kebutuhan spiritual mereka.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Amerika percaya pada kekuatan agama semesta yang mampu mengkomunikasikan aspek-aspek keindahan, kebenaran, kebijaksanaan, dan kejeniusan. Kepercayaan ini telah mengantar Amerika untuk mencapai kehidupan beragama yang mendalam. Agama semesta jug mengubah perspektif amerika akan hubungan Tuhan, manusia, dan alam.

Kata kunci: *agama semesta -- sains dan teknologi -- abad kehilangan kepercayaan -- Kristen tradisi.*

INTRODUCTION

As nature poems "Sunday Morning" (1923), "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird" (1931), "The Ideas of Order at Key West" (1936) created by Wallace Stevens represent modern American idea, belief, and attitude toward nature. Nature to them is not just a scenery, it is a spiritual resources, a living being speaking to the soul in a language that feel-

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ing and imagination could understand. Nature is considered also as a personality, a friend, a divine friend that sympathizes with man's sorrow, works upon his feeling, speaks for him of beauty, freedom, peace, happiness, touches him intimations of high truth. Nature in this manner can be assumed as religion. This idea is introduced by Emerson in his essay "Nature" (1836). He says, "Man and the physical universe are parallel creation of the same divine spirit; therefore natural and moral law are the same and everything in nature, has spiritual significance for man."

Emerson's philosophy of nature, in fact, stimulate literature in the twentieth century. His writings were source of inspiration for Stevens in producing his poems. With his nature poems Stevens even can "supply the satisfaction" of his audience' religious belief and help them "live their lives" "in an age of disbelief" (Foerster & Falk, 1962 : 988).

Wallace Stevens raised up in the age of disbelief. He encounters that the progress in science gradually replace not only the American old values and faith but their way of life and way of thinking. At that time the intellectuals had ignored to believe in Traditional Christian doctrine and refuse to go to church. No intelligent person believe in God anymore. They rejected the mysterious calling of religion and looked to science for clear truth. (Foerster & Falk, 1962 : 846)

Science continually engages the modern American in extending their intelligent. However, the sudden change produces by science has upset the balance between feeling and thought. The result is that man is not happy in the knowledge, science is capable in bringing mankind into a far happier conditions. This fact leads the Americans to experience alienation, despair, and chaotic situation.

Confronting such crucial problems Stevens attempts to present poems by which modern man can involve in a dynamic relationship between man and his world. With his vision that man can find religion in nature, Stevens tries to create some natural facts as real as possible for modern man to experience and to create the beautiful in a universe that he knows full well to be chaotic. This paper attempts at describing Stevens' as well as the Americans' ideas, belief, and attitude toward nature which they have found out has the ability to communicate beauty, truth, wisdom, and genius.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The method applied in this study is library research that is used to

collect the data concentrating on written sources. The written sources include books relevant to the study of nature religion. Writings about the poet and his works, the history, the social phenomena, and religion atmosphere in the age of disbelief.

In analyzing the facts of nature religion in the poems the writer uses the American Studies perspectives of Henry Nash Smith's Interdisciplinary approaches (Kwait & Turpic, ed., 1980 : 14). The preferred approaches from other disciplines are biography, philosophy, religion, sociology, and history. In so doing the writer is able to illuminate the cultural facts of nature religion and can describe comprehensively the cultural climate of the age of disbelief which affected the production of Stevens poems.

ANALYSIS

Close reading on the three poems reveals that Stevens' central image of nature is nature as religion. Religion in this context is referred to the transcendentalist belief that "Whatever touches the heart with the beauty of virtue and the blessedness of piety is in accordance with religion" (Buell, 1973 : 28). It means that religion is closely related with man's feeling. However, to make his feeling works man needs objects to see, to hear, to smell, and to touch. And for the transcendentalist there is no object that so powerful as natural object that can arouse man's feeling of contentment. Thus in his poems Stevens tries to create natural objects as concrete as possible, so that man can experience the feeling of complacency and delight while he is meditating upon those objects. Through his poems explicitly he engages man to involve in such a dynamic experience with natural objects for they can not only touch man's feeling but also clear up man's imagination as well as his intuition. And seeing religious aspect with clear imagination makes man able to read deeply the Truth, the Beauty, and the Wisdom being communicated by nature. Such imagination helps man to judge wisely what will be rejected and accepted.

The writer observes that in communicating the beauty, the truth, the wisdom, and the genius of nature, Stevens participates in the natural law of spirit that manifest itself in nature. The significant natural law that Stevens would like to expose are that nature communicates freedom, fate, and power. These will be the focuses of the writer analysis.

Nature Communicates Freedom in "Sunday Morning"

The title indicates that there is an activity taking place on Sunday Morning. To the Christianity it is a Holy day, the day that engages them to meet God in the church. There they contemplate on the crucifixion and sacrificing at Christ in order to gain God's grace and a happy life after death.

However in this poem instead of placing the woman in the church Stevens locates her in a center of universe to confront with the sublimity of the phenomenal world. It implies that he would like her to see the beauty of the earth and to reach such a dynamic experience of the unity of man and God in nature. Stevens seems to propose something larger than the church. To him the universe is the natural church where man can communicate directly with God. He even strongly emphasizes on one of his journal that "The true religious force in the world is not the church but the world itself: the mysterious calling of nature and our responses" (Lensing, 1989 :9), this statement reflects Stevens' belief that the church is not the only place where man can find God. God can find every where in this world. Thus, he asks the woman to comprehend the wisdom of nature that is manifested in nature.

Representing modern man who believes that religious life could not be separated from present life in the physical universe, the woman in *Sunday Morning* shows her attitude to maintain a dynamic relationship between herself and her world is accordance with religion. As she meditates upon the concrete object of the physical surrounding, she becomes united with God and experiences a direct communion with the divine force. "Divinity must live within herself" (l. 23). The woman seems successfully practicing a complete identification of the self with the natural landscape in its seasonal changes. Her feeling is content to experience "Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow," (l.24). She willingly accepts the feeling of "grieving in loneliness" (l.25) as much as joy as they fill her emotion. Such emotions can not be separated from her physical fact but united with landscape and indeed, manifest divinity for her soul.

However, it is not a smooth path for the woman to gain such achievement. Suffering desperately, she struggles to free herself from the influence of the old Christian that has been embedded in her soul. When she want to depart, it appears to shadow her way. The woman seems still in prison by the teaching of traditional belief. True devotion for traditional belief can be identified with loyalty to the death of Christ on the cross. It has done based on the belief that the true Christian was supposed to become aware of the presence of Christ in his life and to sense the work-

ing of God's grace in the life of individual. To modern eyes this teaching is identified with loyalty to a particular system of abstract doctrines (Bartlett, 1957 : ix) and Stevens could hardly accept any teaching which is not realistic. He claims that it is useless to hold a religion which guarantee nothing to a real experience. The truth is to sense the presence of God in physical universe, and within oneself, rather than to dream of God beyond the sky. Therefore Stevens directs the Woman's imagination to enter the world of reality and frees from the abstract world of Christian formulation.

The above facts indicate that "Sunday Morning" reflects the Americans' effort in finding freedom from traditional view of religion. The woman's attitudes of seeing that the teaching of Traditional Christian no longer supplied enough reason to sustain her belief has become social phenomena in Stevens' era. The reality made the American decided to free themselves from historical religion and try to search permanent one that spring out from nature.

The modern American claimed that the teaching of Traditional Christian in total depravity, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saint appeared to cloud their imagination in order to see the beauty of earth and to reach such a dynamic experience of the unity of man and God in nature. They even claimed that such teaching tended to bring them to an abstract world rather than real one. And it has led them to a spiritual ruin because of the original sin, the sin that they themselves had not committed. Traditional Christian taught that God brought them into life of wholly depraved, so that under innocent feature of his childhood is hidden a nature with him the potentiality to the evil, a nature which exposes him to God's displeasure and wrath.

To search for the truth they left behind such teaching and try to experience the powerful feeling that nature promised when they confronted the sublimity of the phenomenal universe. Having had experienced the feeling of contentment, they confessed that indeed the sublime in nature can be linked with God's grandeur. By the time they frequently praised the Supreme Author of nature whose wisdom and power are manifested in nature or in wilderness. Wilderness they believed acquired special significance as a restoration of faith. Knowles, a modern American says, "my God is in wilderness . . . the great open book of nature is my religion, my church is the church of forests. (Nash, 1982 : 159).

Nature Communicates Fate in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird"

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird" (1931) portrays modern man as free individual standing in the center of universe trying to comprehend the virtues in nature. The spiritual fact in nature can be deeply comprehended since man can read the language of fate being communicated by nature. Fate to some extent can be related with human destiny, fortune, race, powerlessness, experience, and limitation (Bloom, 1980 :1). Human destiny can be understood as to experience a dynamic experience between man and his world and finding man limitation living in this world.

Living in this world man should become aware that no one can escape from death when it comes. Thus the speaker in this poem admits that death is really part of his life. Thinking of death the speaker seems to transcend his own limitation that people one day must die, must change. He accepts this change as permanent. He does not only find comfort in the realization that he is part of harmonious natural cycles, but also find unity in all life, "A man and a woman and a blackbird" (l. 11) / "Are one" (l. 12) contributed to the continuance of any living things in physical world, thus death too, is a part of the universe.

The necessity of accepting human limitations deals also with experiencing an absolute contact with the physical reality and not wandering into illusions. This poem suggests that human fate is closely related with making oneself maintaining a direct correspondence with material phenomena. Such experience makes one apprehends the spiritual law or moral law manifested in nature. This idea derives from Emerson's concept that the apprehension of spiritual law indeed occurs during a "mystical" experience. Moral truth to him does not come directly "from above" without regarding to sensory information attained "from without" (Taylor & Brain, ed., 1987 : 143). It means that moral truth consist of a purely sensuous life.

Therefore Stevens asks his reader to have serious contact with natural object in order to gain spiritual life. This activity according to him will help them enter the world of intuition. Intuition will guide them to discover the truth by themselves what perhaps any persons before them have discovered. In this poem the speaker admits that he has mastered already abundance of noble virtues but they only come from the mouth of other people, what he demands now is to get directly from nature. Nature will not keep her secret for herself but she tends to reveal herself in many ways. In this sense nature engages the speaker to involve

in such an honest observation on nature. As the speaker tastes and digests the world, he understands that the only ignorant man would deny that the "blackbird is involved / In what I know." (lines, 33, 34).

The phenomena completely shows that every natural objects in this poem are capable of inspiring ideas of truth. The truth being communicated is that man should find pleasure and novelty facing the reality of human fate living in this world. The reality is that nature suggests man to accept death as part of human life. This finding proves that man's mind has reached inner harmony. He finally finds unity in all life which means that the entire world is inseparable and should be seen and understood as a unity.

This spiritual fact indeed shows modern man's rejection of Christian idea of seeing that man as above, rather than off, the natural world might have seen as object that should be conquered as stated in Old Testament that God sent man apart from and gave him dominance over the rest of nature, to surrender it easily. The first commandment of God to man (Genesis 1 : 28), stated that mankind should increase, conquer the earth, and have dominion over all living things. This made the fate of wilderness plain. Wilderness is seen as Lord's garden to conquer. This statement has been translated into the form of gaining material progress. Concentrating on the material progress the American is pushed to conquer the wilderness with an ax and plow. Governor George R. Gilmer of Georgia noted that by virtue of that command of the Creator delivered to man upon his formation be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth, and subdues it. Wilderness was waste; the proper behavior toward it is exploitation. (Nash, 1982 : 31)

Concerned over the lost of wilderness came the transcendentalists to protect them. They made the American paid much attention to natural beauty and proved in many ways that nature was the clearest medium through which God showed His power and excellency. Through their mouth as well as their works the American believed in a correspondence between the higher reality of spiritual truth in the material objects of the physical world. For these reason natural objects were assumed importance, if rightly seen, they reflect universal spiritual truths.

Nature Communicate Power in "The Idea of Order at Key West"

"The Idea of Order at Key West" (1935) exposes Stevens' significant vision of the power of nature. He examines that all the elements in nature run in order and supported to nature's making power. In turn nature share her power to the continuity of the living things in the universe.

According to Stevens, human being as part of universe gains power from nature. The manifestation of power in man is the result of the order imagination from which he gains by contemplating on the magnificent and the sublimity of the phenomenal world. At this level man as well as Stevens find out that God is redeemed by human imagination and reside in man as he says, "God and imagination are one" (Kessler, 1972 : 52), it means that throughout his imagination man will see God and will have a power of creating. For to create, Emerson admits, is to prove of a Divine Presence, "Whoever creates is God . . ." (Buell, 1973 : 30). The Girl in this poem is self-reliant. By respecting herself she has the power to create and produce a beautiful song which Stevens believes coming from an order imagination, "For she was the maker of the song she sang" (l. 15). The singer proves that she can triumph over the disorder of experience. She is the maker who has gained a power to produce her inspiration

The girl in the poem successfully practices man's ability to experience God first hand. As her imagination reaches the order, she experiences a deep and intimate sense of God's presence. Indeed God is immanent in her, thus she can utter the voice of God, "She was the single artificer of the world" / "In which she sang." (l.37, 38). This is the heart of transcendentalism concept of high reason. Since the transcendentalist believes that art is the product of the religious sentiment (Buell, 1972 : 21). It can be accepted that the girl's song is the result of her spiritual growth that she is able to produce God's spirit. She is genius a who has a feeling of inspiration, a feeling that makes her full with a capacity to exercise the talent.

However, the problem is man's imagination or mind or thought is never resting, never satisfied. It continues to produce images through the senses. His sense gives her information from the event that the mind encounters with the world. The intercourse in which the mind takes from the phenomenal reality involves experience and perception which contributes to the source of reality.

In fact, the reality by which the mind encounters in the physical world is not fixed. It is the flowing series of endless confrontation that gives effect to human imagination. In the process, there are so many negative realities that have the potential chance to pollute human imagination. One of the worst happened in the age before and after Stevens was the false teaching of Traditional Christian, then come the scientific age—the age that forced some changes to occur as economic changes, involving political and social changes. Such changes give negative impact to social order. Man has to face the age of coldness, alienation and mechanism. These less pleasant aspects of twentieth century life cast out man

without order as well as chaos.

As an artist, Stevens suggests a possible way of finding meaning and order. His business is to find way to strive the fault perception of the relationship of mind and world, and to make oneself realizes the presence of God within. He wants man himself explores all the projection of the mind and realizes that God dwells in man. To realize means to meditate upon the highly personal figures of the imagination and phenomenal reality. By doing this one can grow up over the life time of creative imagination.

Seen from this perspective it can be said that Stevens in one hand celebrates the poetry of earth, and affects man in positive light on the other. This poem suggests that order should be internalized in chaos of experience. Man should himself impose an order upon the chaos by the power of imagination. Human being has to struggle against the failure of imagination, for the only force that can restore man to his Lost Eden is the imagination.

This reality proves that the spirit as well as imagination can not work effectively without the aid of nature. The power of nature is unlocked, but gives itself to anyone. It will help man find a religion independent of any faith, but he himself discovers. It does not come from man made but from nature. Man in this sort marks that he has gained spiritual maturity. He now lives in a new sense; the mystical impulse and he is no longer to be driven back into doctrines of systematic practice of ecstasy but his soul could open widely its gate to universal love. This is the primary and fundamental principles of human fate which makes man realize that he derives from his highest faculties operating in the relations in which God has fixed him. This moral and religious truth gives way to each man to respond to the spirit of the Enlightenment in his own way.

The above data indicate that man receives the idea of God from the universe, not so exclusively from his own soul. The power, wisdom, and goodness are apparent through the whole creation. It is only through that energy of thought that man understands the creative intelligence which has established the order, dependencies, and harmony of nature. In truth, the beauty and glory and God's work are revealed to the mind by a light from itself. This is the calling for any religious teaching to correspond to the natural object in the physical universe.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that as an American Wallace Stevens devotes faith-

fully to the moral spirit of natural universe. He is free from the teaching of institutional religion, but tries to seek by himself the universal truth in nature. He listens to celestial music of the universe, sees the interdependency of natural objects which are composed in sublimity. Such natural phenomena teach him wisely the essence of wisdom.

Hence, Stevens is not the only American who praises the Bible of universe. Nature religion has got its place more than a century in American social life, so that it can be assumed that it has been widely accepted in Stevens' era (1879 - 1955). Based on this view the writer may say that Stevens works are the reflection of the American experience in general.

In Stevens' "Sunday Morning" Stevens shows that the Americans believe in the philosophical concept of nature that speaks more real and concrete about the highest truth. But Stevens argues that the American can not achieve a dynamic relationship with God in nature unless he makes free his imagination from the abstract teaching of Traditional Christian. Stevens claims that Traditional Christian tends to point their devotion to the abstract heaven beyond the sky. He thinks that the Americans' should get free from such teaching so that they can experience the concrete happiness of the permanent Eden in the physical word.

In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Blackbird" Stevens proves the American of how importance of man to accept death as human limitation. Man should find comfort in the realization that he one must die, must change. For he is part of harmonious natural cycle. At this level man experiences a nice intimation with nature and finds out that here or nowhere is his heaven. These facts lead the Americans to have the same perception of seeing nature as a church where they can find God and not as a place to conquer with an ax and plow.

"In The Idea of Order at Key West Stevens" relates the celebration of the power of human mind or imagination with religious achievement. He shows the Americans that man finally can conquer his imagination from wandering wildly to the abstract place or to the chaotic situation of modern life. With the aids of nature they can makes their imagination run orderly. This helps them master the chaos and live in peace. This peaceful condition Stevens believe does not come from supernatural being, but man himself who makes the effort.

It can be seen clearly that with his vision of nature Stevens can lead his readers to gain the satisfaction of religious believe and show them the way to reach the religious maturity. Having achieved such spiritual quality, they know the way to cure themselves from being despaired and alienated living in the complex mobility of modern world.

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