# Sunday Morning Study Guide

## Sunday Morning by Wallace Stevens

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Introduction

"Sunday Morning," one of the collected pieces in Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923), has been singled out as one of his most eloquent and thematically resonant poems. Stevens wrote the first version of the poem in 1914, which was published by *Poetry* the next year. Harriet Monroe, the editor of the journal, omitted three stanzas of the poem for its publication and significantly rearranged the remaining five stanzas. Stevens made considerable changes, especially to the ending, by the time he collected it in *Harmonium*.

J. Hillis Miller in "William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens," writes that Stevens's poetry is "a prolonged exploration, both in theoretical speculation within the poetry itself and in poetic practice, of the power of language not so much to name reality as to uncover it." This uncovering of reality becomes the focus of "Sunday Morning" as it chronicles one woman's search for spiritual fulfillment in a philosophical dialogue between her and Stevens's poetic persona. Throughout the poem, the two examine two contrasting ideologies: that of Christianity and of paganism. The woman must decide which will help her find the spiritual satisfaction she is seeking.

The poet presents compelling arguments through a series of eloquent images centering on the beauty of the natural world. When the woman notes that this beauty is transitory, the poet counters, "death is the mother of beauty," insisting that the fact of death enhances beauty. After careful consideration of the poet's line of reasoning, by the end of the poem, the woman determines that a devotion to earthly pleasures and not the dead religion of the past will provide her with divine bliss.

# Author Biography

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879, in Reading, Pennsylvania, to Garrett (a lawyer) and Margaretha (a schoolteacher) Stevens. Stevens's father had a great impact on his education and career choices. He established an extensive library in their home, which he encouraged his son to take advantage of, and promoted the value of education. Stevens prospered in school, and by the time he finished high school, he had been recognized for his fine writing and oratory skills.

In 1897, Stevens entered Harvard, where he studied for three years. During this period, he had articles and poems pubalished in the *Harvard Advocate*. After his third year, Stevens left Harvard due to depleted funds. He soon landed a position as a reporter at the *New York Tribune*, which afforded him the time and the opportunity to record his observations of the city as subject matter for his poetry.

After Stevens grew bored with reporting, his father convinced him to pursue a degree in law rather than devote himself to writing. In 1903, he graduated from the New York School of Law, and in 1904, he was admitted to the New York Bar. After working in various law firms, he accepted a position with American Bonding Company, an insurance firm in 1908.

At the beginning of his long career as an insurance lawyer, which extended until the end of his life, Stevens began a fruitful association with several prominent writers and painters in New York's Greenwich Village, including Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Alfred Kreymborg, and e. e. cummings. By 1913, he resumed writing poetry, and in 1914, he began to publish his work in literary magazines. In 1915, he wrote his first major poems, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning." The next year, he tried his hand at play writing, which resulted in his prize-winning play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*.

*Harmonium*, his first collection of poetry, which included "Sunday Morning," was published in 1923. After the publication of his next collection, *Ideas of Order*, Stevens cemented his reputation among a small but influential group of writers and critics as one of America's most important poets. His work would eventually earn him overwhelming critical acclaim and several awards including the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1950, the National Book Award for best poetry in 1951 for *The Auroras of Autumn*, and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and another National Book Award in 1955 for *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, which includes "Sunday Morning."

During the early 1950s, Stevens suffered from cancer and was repeatedly hospitalized. He died of the disease on August 2, 1955, in Hartford, Connecticut.

# Poem Text

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkness among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

## II

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

## III

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.

He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

## IV

She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evenings, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

## V

She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,

She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

## VI

Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

## VII

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn.
And whence they came and whither they shall go

The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

## VIII

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay,"
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or an old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.120

# Plot Summary

In the first stanza, a complacent woman lounges in her dressing gown late into a Sunday morning, eating a leisurely breakfast and enjoying the vivid, vibrant beauty of the natural world around her. She takes great pleasure in her coffee and oranges, her mood reflected by the "sunny" chair and the cockatoo that has been released onto the rug. She is spending a morning at home instead of going to church. The reference to the "holy hush of ancient sacrifice" suggests that the day is Easter Sunday. Initially, the pull of the natural world dissipates the traditional power this day has over the woman, as she has chosen not to take part in Christian rituals. However, as she dreams, the pleasure she experiences this morning is soon extinguished by "the dark encroachment of that old catastrophe," a reference to the crucifixion of Christ. She recognizes that the secular beauty she appreciates is not eternal, and so the colorful oranges and parrot, earlier appearing so full of life, now "seem things in some procession of the dead."

She becomes caught up in Christian dogma as "her dreaming feet" transport her to the "dominion of the blood and sepulchre," symbolic of the ritualistic ceremony in celebration of the Last Supper and Christ's interment. The blood refers to the wine and the sepulchre to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that contained the tomb where Christ's body was laid on Good Friday. Thus, the sensual pleasure of the late morning coffee and oranges has been replaced by the spiritual satisfaction of the bread and wine communion.

The voice of the poet questions the woman's decision to turn her back on the beauty of the natural world and devote herself to her religion. He insists that she could find divinity through a connection to the splendor of the earth. Her earthly pleasures, which he enumerates in this stanza through images of the seasons, should be as cherished as "the thought of heaven." The poet exhorts her to appreciate the very transience of her world since it encompasses the pleasures and pains of living. These passions, not the superstitions that live in "silent shadows and in dreams," are "the measures destined for her soul."

In the third stanza, the speaker expands his focus on religion to the Greek god Jove who had no traditional family to nurture him and no natural connections to the "sweet land." The speaker links this ancient myth to the birth of Christ through the reference to the star that guided the shepherds and wise men to Bethlehem. Both myths, he suggests, are disconnected from human reality. As humanity finds the divine in the natural world, the sky will appear "friendlier," no longer marking the division between heaven and earth.

The woman's voice returns at the beginning of the next two stanzas as she questions the poet's argument that earthly pleasures will provide spiritual fulfillment. While nature fills her with contentment, she wonders whether she can find paradise there. Here, the poet reasserts and clarifies his position. In his response, he acknowledges the impermanence of the world but argues that the bliss she experiences observing the beauty of nature is everlasting through immediate observance of the spring and through

the vividness of her memory. Christian theology, with its "chimera of the grave" (its dark dreams of the crucifixion of Christ) or even its "melodious isles" will not endure as will the magnificence of nature for her.

She complains that even while experiencing contentment in her relationship to the natural world, she feels "the need of some imperishable bliss," which Christianity insists can be found only in complete devotion to the church. The poet counters, "death is the mother of beauty," asserting that she can only experience true satisfaction through the appreciation of that which is impermanent. To prove his point, he describes the passions of youth, symbolized by the ripening of plums and pears. When death "strews the leaves of sure obliteration on our paths," lovers' desires will be heightened as they realize the importance of the moment.

In stanza six, the poet continues his argument that death is the mother of beauty, juxtaposing it with a counter vision of the stasis of heaven, with its ripe fruit that never falls, hanging heavy in "that perfect sky." The rivers there never pour out into the seas or touch the shores. In contrast, "our perishing earth" of beginnings and endings is colored with "inarticulate" pangs and delicious tastes and odors of pear and plum, where she lounges during "silken weavings" of afternoons.

The next stanza suggests an alternative to traditional worship. The poet describes a pagan, almost savage, celebration of the earth, as a ring of men chant sensuous songs praising the beauty of a summer morning. They do not worship a specific god, but the earth for them has the same intense power that had previously been associated with the Christian God, and thus they are devoted to it. As they strip naked in an act of merging their energies with those of nature, they experience paradise. Their chant encompasses all the elements of nature, "the windy lake" and angelic trees as their songs echo off the hills long after they leave. The poet symbolizes this "heavenly fellowship" between nature and the men by noting the "dew upon their feet" as they dance and chant.

The voice of the poet and that of the woman come together in acceptance of an alternate form of worship in the final stanza of the poem. The single voice here notes the inevitability of decay and death and understands that an appreciation of that mutability enriches present experience. The woman acknowledges that Jesus' tomb was not endowed with mystical spirits, that it only contained his grave. She now turns to the natural world, with its "old chaos of the sun" and its understanding of days and nights, beginning and ends.

This realignment with the pagan world of earthly pleasures releases her from the bonds of her religion so that she is now "unsponsored" and free. The natural world is full of the "spontaneous cries" of its creatures in their beautiful surroundings. The final line reinforces the statement that death is the mother of beauty, as the free flying pigeons, "on extended wings" rise and fall following no prescribed course but eventually descend into darkness at the close of day.

# Themes

## Belief and Doubt

The woman in the poem moves back and forth between belief and doubt as she enters into a dialogue with the poet about spiritual fulfillment. At the beginning of the poem, she appears to be content in her newfound appreciation of the earthly pleasures of the natural world. This world with its vivid colors and leisurely breakfasts offers her a sense of freedom in the time she allows herself to appreciate the bounty of nature. Soon, however, doubt over the choice she has made this Sunday morning ruins her serenity. As she appreciates the sensuality of nature, she experiences a growing awareness and dread of its transitory nature. As a result, she becomes filled with spiritual anxiety to the point that she begins to believe that a reversion to Christian rituals and dogma will lead to salvation.

As the speaker tries to convince her to return to her world of earthly delights, she struggles to maintain her belief in traditional theology through a series of questions on the nature of that theology. She wonders whether earth will "seem all of paradise that we shall know" especially given its impermanence. Nature fills her with contentment, yet she asks, "when the birds are gone, and their warm fields return no more, where, then, is paradise?" She continually resists the poet's promotion of a spiritual connection to nature, insisting, "I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss," which she had found in a Christian vision of eternity.

The speaker's voice, however, never wavers from his assertion that she must find divinity within herself, and that this can only be accomplished through a communion with nature. By meeting each question with an imaginative yet logical response, the speaker slowly convinces her to doubt her old beliefs in the divinity of traditional religion. By the end of the poem, she has returned to the position she held at the beginning, again aligning herself with the freedom of birds, "unsponsored" in her attachment to her natural world.

## Death and Life

The speaker's strongest argument for the woman to devote herself to an intense relationship with nature comes in the form of an examination of death and life. He continually associates Christianity and the religions of the past with death. In the first stanza, he notes the darkness of "that old catastrophe," the crucifixion of Christ, and of the "dominion of the blood and sepulchre," the important Christian ritual of communion where believers drink the blood and eat the body of Christ. He also finds death in the static nature of heaven where ripe fruit never falls and the "boughs hang always heavy in that perfect sky." In this immutable world, with its "dividing and indifferent blue," she will never, he insists, be able to make an emotional connection.

The speaker points out that a celebration of nature, by contrast, is a celebration of life, even as he acknowledges its cyclical patterns of death and rebirth. He argues that the very fact of inevitable change fills the present with a stronger sense of vibrancy and poignancy. Thus, this form of "death is the mother of beauty" and so should be accepted as a crucial part of an appreciation of the moment.

## Imagination

In his "Adagia," a set of musings on poetry and the imagination collected in *Opus Posthumous* (1957), Stevens wrote about the importance of the relation of art to life, since with our modern age's lack of faith in God, "the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, for what they validate and invalidate, for what they reveal, for the support they give." This search for an imaginative connection to the real world becomes another dominant theme in the poem.

The speaker continually engages his imagination to convince the woman that fulfillment lies in her connection with nature. The vivid colors of the oranges and the parrot, the "pungent fruit," reflect the "passions of rain, or moods in falling snow." Birds "test[ing] the reality of misty fields, by their sweet questionings" and the "trees, like serafin" illustrate as no philosophizing could manage the limitless, transcendent beauty and bounty of the natural world and call the woman to a communion with it. Faith in the possibilities of spiritual contentment is thus sustained through the power of the imagination.

# Style

## Conversation

The poem takes the form of a conversation or philosophical dialogue between the central character, a woman who is on a quest to find spiritual fulfillment, and the voice of the poet, who attempts to aid her during her journey. The poem could also be regarded as a conversation between self and soul, between the social self that feels pressured to conform to traditional religious doctrines and the internal self that desires a more natural connection with the world.

Its fifteen-line stanzas of blank-verse begins with the woman's precarious situation: initially she feels contentment spending Sunday morning at home, surrounded by the comfort and beauty of her physical environment. But soon, guilt over her dismissal of traditional Christian rituals on Easter Sunday undermines her pleasure, and she becomes filled with spiritual anxiety, conflicted about which path she should take to spiritual fulfillment. After this first stanza, the poem becomes a dialogue between her voice and that of the poet, between the woman's philosophical questionings and his assertion that she can find satisfaction only through a personal, intense communion with the natural world.

Most stanzas begin with a question posed by the woman that is answered by the authoritative voice of the poet, reaffirming his position that sensual pleasures supersede any contentment gained from the dead religions of the past. He presents his argument through association and juxtaposition, continually finding alternate ways to present the same point of view. The cumulative effect of the repeated images results in a convincing argument against a devotion to the tenets of Christianity and for a dedication to an appreciation of and communion with the beauty of nature.

## Imagery

Stevens employs two dominant image clusters, which he continually juxtaposes against each other to illustrate his thematic points. He associates the natural world with the warmth of the sun, which the woman enjoys at the beginning of the poem during her leisurely morning at home on this particular Sunday morning. The sun returns in stanza seven, as the speaker personifies his pagan vision in his description of a ring of men chanting "in orgy on a summer morn." The life-giving properties of the sun are echoed in the vibrant colors associated with the natural world. Initially, the woman lounges complacently on this Sunday morning surrounded by the vivid colors of the oranges she is eating and the "green freedom" of her parrot that has been released onto her rug. Stevens evokes the pleasures of other senses in this setting through the odors of plum and pear. Sound ultimately unifies humans with nature when the men's boisterous chant echoes off the hills long after they have stopped.

Stevens links an absence of sound to Christianity, suggesting that those mythological voices do not carry into present realities. He reinforces this sense of absence when the woman hears a voice that tells her that no spirits linger in Jesus' tomb. The vibrant colors of nature are juxtaposed with dark ancient sacrifices, ceremonies of blood. This cluster of images reinforces the speaker's premise that Christianity is a dead religion that can no longer offer contentment and salvation.

# Historical Context

## Modernism

This term, associated with an important artistic movement during the first few decades of the twentieth century, was reflected in Western literature, painting, music, and architecture. The modernist period in America reached its height in the mid 1910s and extended until the early 1930s. Modernist American literature reflected the growing sense of disillusionment with traditional social, political, and religious doctrines felt by Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century but especially after World War I. Gertrude Stein, an important writer and patron during this period, dubbed the group of writers that expressed the zeitgeist of this age the "lost generation," an epithet Ernest Hemingway immortalized in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, has become a penetrating portrait of this lost generation.

This age of confusion, redefinition, and experimentation produced one of the most fruitful periods in American letters. These writers helped create a new form of literature that repudiated traditional literary conventions. Prior to the twentieth century, writers structured their works to reflect their belief in the stability of character and the intelligibility of experience. Traditionally, novels, stories, and poetry ended with a clear sense of closure as conflicts were resolved and characters gained knowledge about themselves and their world. The authors of the Lost Generation challenged these assumptions as they expanded the genre's traditional form to accommodate their characters' questions about the individual's place in the world.

## Modernist Poetry

Modernist poetry contained the same thematic import as its counterparts in fiction. One of the most important poems of this period, or it can be argued of the entire century, is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which echoed the disillusionment and anxiety expressed by the lost generation writers.

Poetry in this movement, as with other works of modernism, experimented with new ideas in psychology, anthropology, and philosophy that had become popular in the early part of the century. Freudianism, for example, began to be studied by these writers as they explored the psyche of their characters and recorded their often subjective points of view of themselves and their world.

## Imagists

Modernist poetry experiments with new forms and styles in its concern with the verisimilitude of language. A group of poets that were prominent in the second decade of the twentieth century, the imagists had an important effect on modernist poetry in this sense. This group of writers rejected traditional cliched poetic diction and regulated

meter in favor of more natural expressions of language written in free verse. One of the leading proponents of this movement, Ezra Pound published his anthology *Des Imagistes* in 1913, with examples of what he considered to be imagist verse by James Joyce, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), William Carlos Williams, F. S. Flint, Ford Madox Ford, and Amy Lowell among others. Pound included in the work his imagist Doctrine, which insisted on a "direct treatment of the thing"□the essence of what the poet is expressing, the discarding of any language that did not "contribute to the presentation" of this essence, and the emphasis on a sequence of musical phrases rather than of a metronome. In his article on Stevens for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Joseph Miller argues that this movement had a profound influence on Stevens's work, but "it did not take long for him to recognize the banality of mere images and to see the possibilities of such images as symbols of larger things."

# Critical Overview

Harriet Monroe, in her review of *Harmonium* for *Poetry* (the journal she founded), proclaims that readers breathe "delight . . . like a perfume" in response to the "natural effluence of [Stevens's] own clear and untroubled and humorously philosophical delight in the beauty of things as they are." All critics, however, were not as impressed by this volume. Joseph Miller, in his article on Stevens for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, notes that the few critics who paid attention to the collection dismissed it "as a product of mere dilettantism."

After the publication of succeeding volumes of poetry, Stevens established a reputation as one of America's finest poets that has been maintained to this day. The growing regard for his poetry was due in large part to major critical works written by Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom. Bloom wrote in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* that the poet is "a vital part of the American mythology" and "the best and most representative American poet of our time."

Today, *Harmonium* is considered to be one of his finest collections. Miller comments that the poems in this volume "reveal Stevens as a poet of delicate, but determined, sensibility, one whose perspective is precise without being precious, and whose wit is subtle but not subdued." He writes that Stevens reveals an "extraordinary vocabulary, a flair for memorable phrasing, an accomplished sense of imagery, and the ability to both lampoon and philosophize."

Special praise has been reserved for "Sunday Morning," considered to be one of Stevens' finest poems. Critics note that its importance lies in its thematic import and its expression. George and Barbara Perkins in their overview of the poem for *The American Tradition in Literature* applaud Stevens' portrayal of "the perturbation and consequent seeking of 'everyman' who "feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe"□the traditions of Christianity. They note that Stevens appropriately leaves the questions he raises in the poem "beyond the reach of reason."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

# Critical Essay #1

*Perkins teaches American literature and film and has published several essays on American and British authors. In the following essay, Perkins examines Stevens's unique employment of the literary motif* carpe diem *in this poem.*

*Carpe diem*, a Latin phrase from Horace's *Odes*, translates into "seize the day." The phrase became a common literary motif, especially in lyric poetry and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English love poetry. The most famous poems that incorporate this motif include Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, Andrew Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress," Edward Fitzgerald's "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," and Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Modern writers have also employed the motif, most notably Henry James in *The Ambassadors* and "the Beast in the Jungle," and obviously Saul Bellow in *Seize the Day*.

Typically the speaker in a poem that uses *carpe diem* as its theme proposes that since death is inevitable and time is fleeting, the listener, often a reluctant virgin, should take advantage of the sensual pleasures the speaker reveals to her.

Wallace Stevens puts a modern spin on this traditional *carpe diem* theme in his celebrated poem, "Sunday Morning." Like his poetic predecessors, he directs his speaker to advise a woman to experience sensual pleasures but not as a prerequisite to losing her virginity. Stevens's speaker urges the woman in the poem to turn from a devotion to Christian doctrines to a spiritual connection with the natural world. Stevens combines the traditional and modern in poem's presentation of the *carpe diem* theme to suggest that a celebration of earthly pleasures can result in freedom from the strict confines of Christianity.

Most poems present a classical point of view in their expression of the *carpe diem* theme, reflecting the pagan spirit in nature as the speakers try to convince their listeners to give themselves up to sensual experience. For example, in Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress," the speaker's goal is to convince a young woman to join him and become like "amorous birds of prey" and "tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life."

"Sunday Morning" reverses the order of this classical tradition. The woman begins the poem effectively "seizing the day" by not going to church on Easter Sunday, as is traditionally expected of practicing Christians. She instead spends a leisurely morning lounging in her peignoir, contentedly indulging in the sensual pleasures of breakfast in a "sunny chair." Stevens introduces his main theme in this first stanza through his depiction of the "green" freedom of a cockatoo that she has released from its cage. Throughout the poem, Stevens will assert his point that one should seize the day through a celebration of the natural world, not of traditional Christian theology, to experience true freedom and fulfillment.

The title becomes an apt thematic pun. On this Sunday, a traditional Christian day set aside to worship the son of God, a woman is enjoying a day of nature's sun. Yet, when she recognizes the mutability of the natural world, she experiences a spiritual dread, compounded by her turning away from the rituals of Christianity. As a result, she allows the "encroachment of that old catastrophe" and finds herself passing "over the seas, to silent Palestine," with its promise of eternal life. By the end of the stanza, the woman has exchanged an earthly ritual for a religious one. She turns from her breakfast of oranges and coffee to thoughts of the bread and wine communion.

For the rest of the poem, Stevens turns to the traditional *carpe diem* structure, with the speaker trying to convince the young woman to seize the day; the methods he suggests to accomplish this, however, reflect a modern loss of faith in traditional religion and an impetus toward individual freedom.

Throughout the poem, Stevens presents images of a fearful, death-obsessed Christianity. He juxtaposes the natural world associated with light with the Christian world of darkness, another ironic reversal of Christian symbolism. Thoughts of the death of Christ on this Easter Sunday come in only in darkness (stanza 1) and in shadows (stanza 2), silent like the grave. Christianity's focus on death is illustrated by its "ancient sacrifice" and "dominion of the blood and sepulchre." In stark contrast, the natural world, filled with sunlight is composed of "pungent oranges and bright, green wings."

After introducing these symbolic contrasts between the natural and Christian worlds in the first stanza, Stevens introduces his speaker in the second. Throughout the rest of the poem, the poet's persona engages in a dialogue with the woman, trying to imbue her with a vision of nature that can satisfy her deepest impulses for spiritual and emotional fulfillment.

He first questions her devotion to Christianity by pointing out its association with "silent shadows" in contrast to the natural "comforts of the sun" and the vivid sights and smells that reveal the beauty of the earth, "things to be cherished like the thought of heaven." She can find a more fulfilling divinity within herself, he insists, through a consummation with nature.

He addresses her focus on the impermanence of the natural world, again providing an ironic reversal of Christian doctrine, which promotes eternal life. A large part of his argument is that Christianity is a dead religion, offering its followers nothing but darkness and silence. In contrast, a celebration of the natural world, through an acceptance of its cyclical nature, provides her with spiritual as well as physical satisfaction. Thus, the woman should spend her day not in church, but in contact with nature. He directs her to welcome the very transience of her world since it evokes sadness as well as joy, the pleasures and pains reflecting the wide spectrum of life. These passions, not the superstitions that live in "silent shadows and in dreams," are "the measures destined for her soul."

In the third stanza, the speaker compresses time into a narrative of the evolution of religion to suggest that no natural connections exist between religious myths and the

world. The pre-Christian gods had "inhuman" births and did not travel on sweet lands that gave "[l]arge-mannered motions to [their] mythy mind[s]." The speaker links Jove's inhuman birth to Christ's virgin birth, symbolized by the star. He then reinforces the sense of separation between the gods and nature when he points out that religions set up a hierarchical system of heaven and earth, as reflected in the image of a king moving among his hinds, or workers, and a "dividing and indifferent blue." Humans can never hope to establish a true harmony with the object of their devotion given the strict hierarchical nature of traditional religious practices.

The remainder of this stanza illustrates Stevens's statement in his "Adagia" that "The death of one god is the death of all." The speaker tells the woman that after discarding the dead religions of the past, she can experience a communion between her natural self and the world. As a result of this shattering of hierarchies, the earth will become a paradise. By accepting that life contains "a part of labor and a part of pain," the "sky will be much friendlier" than it was when it divided her from her spiritual fathers.

As Stevens explains in his essay "Two or Three Ideas," in a time when we have lost faith in the old gods, when they have become "the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style of bearing themselves in reality." J. Hillis Miller in his critical work, *From Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*, suggests that the poem is Stevens's "most eloquent description of the moment when the gods dissolve." Miller argues that the poem suggests that "bereft of the supernatural, man does not lie down paralyzed in despair. He sings the creative hymns of a new culture, the culture of those who are 'wholly human' and know themselves."

The woman responds in the next two stanzas that she is still troubled by the impermanence of nature, when "the birds are gone, and their warm fields return no more." As the poet answers her questions in each, he reasserts and clarifies his position. She notes that observing living nature fills her with contentment. However, when the inevitable cycle of nature turns to winter and encroaching death, she wonders "where, then, is paradise?" The speaker answers by reasserting that the old myths with their "chimera of the grave" or even their "melodious isles" cannot endure "as April's green endures, or will endure." When she desires warm June evenings in the cold of winter, he insists that her memories of "the consummation of the swallow's wings" in the spring will offer her the spiritual satisfaction she is seeking. The reality and the memory of the beauty of the earth create substance not myth. He assures her of the cyclical nature of the world, which will continually replenish itself.

When the woman claims "the need of some imperishable bliss," as in the Christian vision of eternal life, the poet counters, "death is the mother of beauty," asserting that she can only experience true satisfaction through the appreciation of that which is impermanent. The transitory nature of her world infuses it with poignancy and thus divinity. Death enhances beauty as it heightens the experience of the present, acknowledging the inevitable changes that will occur. The poet illustrates his point in his descriptions of the maidens sitting and gazing at the grass and tasting new plums and pears, as aware of their surroundings as the woman had been at the beginning of the

poem, before thoughts of her old religion encroached upon her sunny freedom. The inevitability of death appears in the wind that "makes the willow shiver in the sun." Yet even as the leaves swirl about them, suggesting the impending decay of winter, the maidens stray through them impassioned, fully alive in the moment made more poignant by the knowledge that it will soon fade.

The poet reinforces his vision in his presentation of the stagnancy of heaven, with its ripe fruit that never falls hanging heavy in "that perfect sky" and its rivers that never pour out into the seas or touch the shores. Alternately, "our perishing earth" with its inevitable cycle of change and renewal comes alive with delicious tastes and odors of pear and plum and "silken weavings."

He envisions his new, natural religion in the seventh stanza as a ring of "supple and turbulent" men sing "their boisterous devotion to the sun, not as a god, but as a god might be." Nature does not establish hierarchies that separate her from humanity. The god of nature appears naked among the men "like a savage source" commingling with their blood until the men experience a complete communion with their world, as their chants become a choir, echoing from the hills "long afterward." They know full well of the inevitability of death and rebirth and so celebrate the present beauty and bounty of nature. The poet links the woman's experience to that of the men through the warmth of the sun that all of them experience, suggesting that she too can feel such imperishable bliss.

The voice of the poet and that of the woman merge in the acceptance of a call to live in the moment at the end of the poem. The single voice here no longer turns to the grave of Jesus for spiritual fulfillment, since it understands that there are no "spirits lingering" around His tomb. Christianity has lost its power over the woman who now has become "unsponsored" and free to celebrate a new faith in the sensual beauty that surrounds her. Her more profound contact with nature has become a substitute for the restrictive sacraments of her religion. Through the acknowledgement of the mutability of the natural world, she becomes like the free flying pigeons, "on extended wings" rising and falling in "ambiguous undulations as they sink."

**Source:** Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Sunday Morning," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

# Critical Essay #2

*Witcover is an editor and writer whose fiction, book reviews, and critical essays appear regularly in magazines and online. In the following essay, Witcover discusses history and technique in this poem.*

Wallace Stevens gives hope to late-bloomers everywhere. His first collection of poetry, *Harmonium*, was published in 1923, when he was fortyfour years old. His second collection, *Ideas of Order*, did not appear until eleven years later, in 1934. Yet by the time of his death in 1955, Stevens had received virtually every major award and honor the literary community could bestow and was widely acknowledged not only as one of the great poets of the century, but, in the words of critic Harold Bloom in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, "a vital part of American mythology."

Not bad for a man who spent his entire adult life laboring as a lawyer for insurance companies! It seems paradoxical that the same man could devote himself with equal diligence if not ardor to poetry and the law, let alone insurance, as if some inevitable clash between imagination and reality, like matter and anti-matter, should render such a harmony impossible. Yet Stevens saw no necessary conflict between imagination and reality; indeed, despite the admitted difficulty of his poetry, its concern with philosophical and metaphysical questions that at times become frustratingly abstract, Stevens wrote in the belief, or in the desire to believe, that imagination and reality should be complementary. By awakening the imagination to its participation in the concrete specificity of the real world, Stevens could achieve for himself and his readers, through a "supreme fiction" of poetry, a kind of transcendent, timeless awareness of creative human involvement in an all-encompassing natural order that would replace the traditional faith in God and divine providence which, at least to certain classes of people in Western civilization, no longer seemed sustainable. For Stevens, the poet's role was not to provide answers but rather to question deeply and persistently in order that readers might construct their own continually evolving answers. Those answers, like the questions that spawned them, would necessarily be grounded in the real or, as Stevens sometimes called it, the "normal." In his essay "Imagination as Value," collected in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, Stevens wrote: "The chief problems of any artist, as of any man, are the problems of the normal and . . . he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give."

Just how much Stevens's imagination had to give in this cause was apparent from the start of his career. *Harmonium* is an extraordinarily accomplished debut, a dazzling display of high ambition wedded to prodigious talent. Poet and critic Randall Jarrell, in his essay "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," reprinted in the collection *No Other Book*, wrote that "there are in *Harmonium* six or eight of the most beautiful poems an American has written." "Sunday Morning," first published in a somewhat different form in *Poetry* magazine in 1915, must be ranked among that select number; in the estimation of critic Robert Rehder, writing in *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, it is "the first great poem that Stevens wrote. . . . Here, all at once, the poet is in full possession of his powers."

In the essay "Imagination as Value," Stevens states that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written." "Sunday Morning" is Stevens's first mature attempt to write this "great poem of the earth," a project that would occupy him for the rest of his life; that Stevens originally planned to title his collected poems "The Whole of Harmonium" shows the extent to which he viewed his life's work as a coherent enterprise, a single long poem.

"Sunday Morning" consists of eight fifteenline stanzas composed in beautiful, seemingly effortless blank verse□blank verse being a kind of poetry that is unrhymed but, in contrast to free verse, written in lines of regular length and me- ter, generally, as here, iambic pentameter. In tone and style, "Sunday Morning" harkens back to romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, and Coleridge. Stevens alludes to the poetry of these and other predecessors throughout his poem; the final stanza, for example, is closely patterned on the last stanza of Keats' "On Autumn." Stevens evokes the romantics to establish a connection of subject and sensibility, yet the consolations that were available to nineteenth-century romantic poets are not, or should not be, available to a twentieth-century American poet. History, if nothing else, demonstrates that the way back is not the way forward.

What marks the poem as modern despite its purposeful romantic echoes is that it takes as a given the loss or futility of religious faith that has come to be recognized as a central theme of modernism. Stevens's focus is on Christianity, but he more than implies that the crisis of belief has extended beyond any one religious system to encompass all religions past and present. The phrase "crisis of belief" is no exaggeration in describing the Western world of 1915, with the carnage of World War I fast eroding traditional notions of faith and patriotism. In 1914, with German troops advancing on Paris, Stevens had contributed four poems to a special "war" issue of *Poetry* magazine, and "Sunday Morning" itself was composed in a year that saw the beginnings of trench warfare and the senseless slaughter it would entail. As critic James Longenbach points out in his essay on Stevens in *American Writers*, "Stevens was not much of a topical poet, but his poetry always emerged in dialogue with the events of his time." This is certainly true of "Sunday Morning," where events on distant battlefields, while not determinative, contribute to the "dark encroachment" that drifts in to disturb the poem's initially peaceful and civilized setting of an upper class woman's boudoir on a lazy Sunday morning. The pun implicit in the title is more than justified by the deeply elegiac mood that will come to dominate the poem.

"Sunday Morning" takes the form of a dramatic dialogue between this nameless young woman and an equally nameless narrator who is probably older, and certainly more experienced. Critic Helen Vendler, in *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, advances the intriguing notion that the narrator "is a voice from the sepulcher"; that is, a dead man, a ghost, for whom "all sorrow, triumph, and love are infinitely distanced in some remote and remembered pathos of the past." Both voices, that of the young woman and the older narrator can be thought of as aspects of the poet, of Stevens himself. The poem is a meditation, the record of a mind in dialogue with itself. This is a quality shared by many of Stevens's poems, as Rehder notes: "The poems do not merely represent the mind's mulling and churning; they are doing what they are

describing—like all art, they *are* thinking." In terms of physical action and setting, the poem is static, unchanging from the first stanza to the last, although immense distances are traversed in time and space through the evolving thoughts and fantasies of the poet and his personas. The poem does not advance in the machine-like manner of logical argument, marching step by step toward an inevitable conclusion, but unfolds according to the same mysteriously organic patterning of unconscious thought and emotion that produce fantasies and dreams. Which is not to say that the poem is purely imagistic, with nothing to communicate beyond the artifact of itself; "Sunday Morning" eloquently and suggestively addresses a condition of human existence that readers are presumed—and, to judge by the poem's continuing popularity, presumed correctly— to share.

Stanza 1 opens with an obviously well-to-do young woman savoring a late, lazy breakfast of oranges and coffee on a Sunday morning. Instead of attending church, she is still dressed in her peignoir, or nightgown, drowsing "in a sunny chair" while her pet cockatoo, released from its cage, enjoys its "green freedom." The first sentence employs a number of words that are bursting with life, color, and vitality, words associated with nature: "oranges," "green," "freedom," "sunny," "cockatoo." The same sentence also features words and phrases, some explicitly linked to religion, that conjure opposing thoughts of stasis and death: "complacencies," "dissipate," "holy hush," "ancient sacrifice." Here, in simple and stark outline, Stevens sets out the argument about to unfold in the mind of the poet, an argument between life, associated with nature, and death, associated with religion.

The woman may not be in church, but thoughts of church, or at any rate religion, are not far from her mind. The phrases "holy hush" and "ancient sacrifice" in line 5 herald what Stevens beautifully calls, in lines 6-7, "the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe." By "old catastrophe," he means both the crucifixion of Jesus and the establishment of the Catholic church. Influenced by these pious and guilty thoughts, in lines 9-11, the woman's dreamy reverie darkens: "The pungent oranges and bright, green wings / Seem things in some proces- sion of the dead / Winding across wide water, without sound." In these lines, one can see the allusion to World War I, "the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe" suggesting oppressive thoughts of the war in Europe—that this war was being fought between self-avowedly Christian powers only underscores Stevens's point of the deadening effect of traditional religion. But in the poem itself, Stevens has another destination than Europe in mind; in a striking allusion to one of Jesus' miracles, he sends the woman on "dreaming feet" all the way back to the source: "silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulcher." Here "blood" refers to the blood of Christ; far from being associated with the triumph of life over death, as in Christian theology, it is reversed, now serving as a symbol of death's dominion over life. Stevens's poetry can be densely layered with symbol and allusion; a single word or phrase or line often contains multiple embedded meanings. It is a measure of his genius that these constellations of tightly compacted symbols and allusions do not weigh down his poems or turn them into beautiful but lifeless artifacts (like sepulchers) but instead, by unpacking themselves in the minds of readers, actually achieve the opposite, bringing the poems to life.

In stanza 2, lines 16-22, the poem's narrator departs from his passive description of physical and psychological setting to actively enter the poem for the first time by asking and then answering a series of rhetorical questions:

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

Note the reappearance of key words from the first stanza; this is a structural technique Stevens uses throughout the poem, repeating words either verbatim or in a slightly altered fashion to get at the words and the associations behind them, from new angles. The word "sunny" in line 2, for example, reappears as "sun" in line 19 and in various guises thereafter. Other important words that echo throughout the poem are "blood," "wings," and "sky." It should also be noted how frequently the appearance of one word calls forth the appearance of an answering word that contains opposing qualities, as again, "sunny" in line 2 is followed in line 6 by "dark." Thus, as Longenbach notes, "the poem moves by association and juxtaposition." Readers experience the poem as the drifting of thoughts almost at random, one image calling up a related or opposite image, yet Stevens is in control, carefully building a network of intricately linked associations that will pull tight and then unravel to astonishing effect in the poem's final stanza.

But to return to stanza 2, a divinity that comes in shadows and dreams is a ghost. Rather than look to a ghost, or to the dead son of God, for comfort in her awareness of death and mortality, the narrator advises the woman in lines 19 and 21 to look to the sun and to the "balm and beauty of the earth." She herself must be the residence of divinity; in place of a lifeless tomb or bodiless spirit, a living body of flesh and blood. And not only that; she must recognize that this divinity is present in the rest of the natural world, of which she is a part: "The bough of summer and the winter branch. / These are the measures destined for her soul." Here Stevens expresses the idea of a kind of natural immortality opposed to the unnatural immortality of Christianity. This natural immortality is one of change and cyclical recurrence, and Stevens evokes it beautifully in the image of a branch changing with the seasons. While the span from the leafy green branch of summer to the bare branch of winter is one "measure" of mortality, it is also, and more accurately, seen as a "measure" in a musical sense, part of an orchestrated order in which themes recur just as the seasons pass and recur, the branch that is bare in winter sprouting fresh leaves in the spring.

Stanza 3 traces the history of religion from Jove to Jesus; from pagan beliefs to Christianity. Both systems are found wanting. The former because it had so little of humanity and the earth in it; the latter because it has alienated humanity from the earth and from nature. Instead of an aloof, inhuman god who walks among humans "as a muttering king, / Magnificent, would move among his hinds" (lines 34-35; "hinds" means "servants"), or a god who mingles with humanity only so that humanity might rise above

itself, joining him in heaven, the narrator speaks (in lines 42-45) of a future time when the earth itself will be the only paradise humanity knows or can know:

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

The woman speaks for the first time in stanza 4, protesting that while nature in its plenty might confer a measure of contentment, "'when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?'" (lines 49-50.) The narrator answers her question as he did his own: paradise lies in the recurrence of the seasons, in the cycle of birth and death. But he goes a step further, stressing that it is the woman's mind, her imagination, that imbues nature's round with human significance. No heavenly paradise, he asserts in lines 56-57, "has endured / As April's green endures; or will endure / Like her remembrance of awakened birds."

The woman is not so easily convinced. In stanza V, line 62, she asserts "The need of some imperishable bliss." The narrator answers in line 63 (in an allusion to the final stanza of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy") that "Death is the mother of beauty." Stevens insists that it is the human consciousness of time and the inevitability of death within time that makes things beautiful; what's more, that is the only beauty humans may know. The transitory yet recurring nature of life is then contrasted, in stanza VI, with a paradise of petrified beauty in which ripe fruit never falls and nothing ever changes. That heaven, the narrator suggests in lines 88-90, is an infantile projection against an equally infantile fear of death:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

What, then, does the narrator offer the woman in place of the solace of Christianity? Stanza 7, lines 91-95, presents a glimpse of a future in which

ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.

As the narrator goes on to paint a picture of this future paradise, two things become evident. First, there are no women allowed; it is an earthly paradise made by men, for men, and, one fears, very much at the expense of women. Second, this vision of a future for manly men seems like a bizarre vision of an idealized primitive past. The contrast between the tone and content of this stanza (which, despite its placement, thematically follows immediately after stanza 3) is so striking that one wonders if this is not perhaps the woman's ironic fantasy of what a future paradise will look like rather

than the stolid narrator's. There is something either ironic or almost obscene in the elevated language used in lines 102-103, for example, to speak of "the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish and of summer morn" as though an all-too-earthly "fellowship of men that perish" was not adding to its ranks each day in the trenches and on the battlefields of Europe. But in fact, the jarring impact of this stanza on a contemporary reader□critic Janet McCann, in *Wallace Stevens Revisited: The Celestial Possible*, calls it "artificial and contrived"□ is simply an illustration of the way in which history can intrude to alter forever the interpretation of a poet's lines. Readers cannot blind themselves to the facts or ironies of history; to ignore them when reading a poem or looking at any piece of art is to relegate that art to the realm of the unliving. In view of Stevens's preference as expressed in this poem and others for the living over the sepulchral dead, one can only conclude that he himself would disapprove of such an approach. Yet by the same token, it would be wrong to judge this or any poem solely on the basis of such knowledge, unavailable to the poet. Whatever Stevens's intent in this obscure stanza, it is clear that the vision of a future paradise it puts forward is provisional, a possibility only. If this were not the case, the poem would end, unsatisfyingly, here. Instead, it concludes with the majestic ambiguities of stanza 8, which more than redeem the faults of stanza 7.

In stanza 8, lines 106-108, the woman hears a voice crying out that

"The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."

With these lines, which begin in lofty poetic diction yet close in a phrase of simple human dignity, the poem comes full circle, returning to the setting of its first stanza; like the natural paradise of which it speaks, "Sunday Morning" is cyclical. Yet, within the fixed parameters of that cycle, there has been change; Jesus has become fully human, god made in man's image rather than the other way around, subject to death and whatever natural paradise all humans participate in by virtue of living and dying. Jesus died; so did Wallace Stevens; so will all human beings; yet life will go on, the same yet different, and this is all of paradise that humans know or, by a continuing effort of sympathetic and creative imagination, can know. The lines in which Stevens sets forth the final, elegiac statement of his poem are profoundly moving, beginning with line 110, "We live in an old chaos of the sun," and ending, in lines 117-120, with:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The magnificence of these lines is due not only to the stirring poetry with which Stevens imbues them but also to the way in which images and symbols from the poem, which have been carefully repeated and varied throughout, expanding in meaning and gathering substance with each iteration, are here brought together in a masterful culmination that leads not to a resolution but instead to the somehow cathartic

uncertainty of that unforgettable final image, which seems to express so well and with such nobility of spirit the paradoxical heart of human existence. One can do no better than to quote Randall Jarrell:

> Here□in the last purity and refinement of the grand style, as perfect, in its calm transparency, as the best of Wordsworth□is the last wilderness, come upon so late in the history of mankind that it is no longer seen as the creation of God, but as the Nature out of which we evolve; man without myth, without God, without anything but the universe which has produced him, is given an extraordinarily pure and touching grandeur in these lines□lines as beautiful, perhaps, as any in American poetry.

**Source:** Paul Witcover, Critical Essay on "Sunday Morning" in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

# Critical Essay #3

*Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. She has also taught English Literature in addition to English as a Second Language overseas. In this essay, Kryhoski considers how Stevens urges the reader to find peace in nature.*

Wallace Stevens begins his poem "Sunday Morning" in a relaxed, exotic atmosphere, evoking sensual, colorful images of a female protagonist, casually lounging in the warmth of the sun. The vibrancy of the moment is immediately subdued by the mention of a dark "encroachment of that old catastrophe," and the work shifts. In Stevens's careful consideration of language, he has established a new "religion," infused or filled with symbols of an old one. The poet urges the reader to find peace in the spirit of nature, of the present moment, by personifying nature as a nurturing presence. Stevens creates an interesting dichotomy within the work, employing a series of similar contrasts in an effort to come to terms with what many have described as a loss of Christian faith.

The poet relies on vivid images, images heavy with meaning, to establish a dark, serious tone. Towards the end of the first stanza, for example, the reader is transported "over the seas to silent Palestine / Dominion of blood and sepulchre." The sepulchre, or burial vault, of Christ is located in Palestine. The mention of blood and of the grave, coupled with earlier clues, that is, "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice," reinforce images of Christ's crucifixion. Christ is a symbol of ultimate sacrifice in Christianity, a sacrifice of life to purge or wipe clean man's behavioral slate in the world. Christ also surfaces again in stanza four when the poem's female protagonist, in her discomfort, questions the permanence of a paradise on earth. Such imagery inspires assurances by the poet that neither is there a "haunt of prophecy" nor "chimera [imaginary monster] of the grave" that can rival or compete with "April's green." The line again recalls the death of Christ as it was prophesied, and his return as proven by his supernatural appearance.

Curious too is the choice of words the poet uses to describe these images related to Christ. They are not tangible or concrete concepts but are described rather as dreamy, haunting visions of ghosts and monsters. Stevens ponders the relevance of exercising the power of fancy or imagination to invoke the divine in stanza two, asking "What is divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams?" The query solidifies the poet's objective□ to present specific images in nature, exposing them as being more practical symbols as well as sources of spiritual comfort than those born of religious ideals. While Heaven is identified as being unrealistic, intangible or out of reach, a glimpse of divinity is easily manifested in nature, "In any balm or beauty of the earth" and made bountiful. In the same stanza, passions and moods described as natural acts reinforce the idea of nature as being a vital part of a total divine experience. The poet insists to his protagonist that "divinity must live within herself; passions of rain, or moods in falling snow." Her passions and moods are described as events in nature, as natural acts. The primacy of her connection to the natural world reverberates or resounds in stanza seven. Its pagan imagery□men supple and turbulent chanting in orgy on a summer morning, dancing in the sun, devoted to it□constitutes a visual feast. Life is

real; it is pulsing; Life is warm, loud, rhythmic, alive, and strong in the image of these men who dance in the warmth of the sun.

The historical backdrop for Stevens's work certainly dictated his interest in finding a spiritual connection amidst poetic scribblings. At the turn of the century, Stevens believed that the failings of religion could be overcome by the art of poetry. His published letters, as recounted in Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair's *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, shed light on such sentiments. Stevens felt that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written." He also expressed great concerns that we had "terribly forsaken the earth," ignoring the wonder of its enormity, of its vastness and diversity in favor of creating cityscapes. But ultimately, it was the power of the written word, the limitless potential for self-expression in poetry, that compelled Stevens to embrace it as "the supreme fiction" and "a freshening of life." He pondered a life devoid or without Christian conviction, insisting on finding a suitable replacement. Stevens came to the ultimate conclusion that "I ought to believe in imagination," and that the "imagination is the liberty of the mind."

The true power of the work is indeed found in its ability to embrace death amidst a godless universe. In stanza five, death is described as "the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / and our desires." There is no other way to explain what happens after death, states the poet, until you experience it for yourself. Death is the ultimate answer to the most perplexing of human questions inspiring the greatest of fears, namely, the existence of life after death. Death, according to Stevens, is not a fate inspiring terror, but should be seen as an act of intense liberation from fear and doubt. It is not only a point of discovery for the poet, but part of a great continuum.

An embrace of this ominous concept also serves as a springboard for Stevens. Death is not only a means to an end, but it is a part of an ongoing story reflected in nature. The same path of "sure obliteration" is also, reminds the poet, "where triumph rang its brassy phrase." In a similar fashion, "sick sorrow" is paired with "love's tender whisper." These contradictory terms offset one another, the bad with the good, betraying a balance. One term is interdependent on the other to amplify its meaning□you cannot know one without the other, if you are to truly live. Such systematic pairings or wordplay serve to build a case for enjoying life on earth. Although life has its heartaches, it is also an occasion for great celebration. Throughout the poem, this concept of renewal, of infusing new life into old objects or ideas, is a repeated sentiment, literally as well as figuratively in the text. In one scene, boys pile "new plums and pears / on disregarded plate." Said Stevens, as quoted by Ellman and O'Clair,

> Plate is used in the sense of so-called family plate (that is, household silver.) Disregarded refers to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed for a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases and renews. What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make use of.

Life for the elderly is a worn path, it is withered, dead. In direct contrast, life for the young is a fresh experience, making even the old plate look new. As the "maidens taste / and stray impassioned in the littering leaves," their participation in an innocent seduction is reminiscent of the Fall. Equally powerful are the images of pears and plums, symbols of a woman's reproductive power. Couple these images and the maidens become part of the reproductive process, of the circle of life. Compare again the young of the maidens and the dead, "littering leaves," or the newly-ripened fruit on "disregarded plate," so old, used up□all participate in the life cycle, in the continuous process of death and of renewal.

Wallace Stevens's *Sunday Morning* is no somber affair. During a time of great innovation and change, questions abound about the existence of God and religion. Whereas many found the attempt to embrace scientific progress while maintaining their Christian convictions wearing, Stevens had moved forward, found a solace in his poetry of the every day, inspired by his natural surroundings. He encourages the reader to celebrate a vision of heaven on earth, to look toward "our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly," for our comfort and care.

**Source:** Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on "Sunday Morning," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following essay excerpt, Stern examines the "two conceptions of life" present in "Sunday Morning."*

We have already observed that for Stevens the poetic pursuit of pleasure was among the most ur- gent tasks in which a twentieth-century poet could engage. The poetic enactment of pleasure is, after all, equivalent to what Irving Howe has properly argued to be the main concern of Stevens' poetry: "discovering and . . . enacting the possibilities for human self-renewal in an impersonal and recalcitrant age." This enactment, as we have seen in our examination of "Peter Quince at the Clavier," requires that we maintain our capacity for imaginative, even amatory, response to physical beauty, and from it learn modes of subjective experience worthy of mirroring the external world that feeds the spirit. Stevens' boldest and most famous attempt to embody this process is "Sunday Morning," a poem in which the natural beauty earlier symbolized by Susanna is confronted nakedly as explicit subject. And the poem may properly be called "romantic," not only in the special sense I have discussed, but also because it celebrates, in blank verse that rivals and in some particulars may have been influenced by Wordsworth's own, a physical world sufficient to satisfy those instincts for order, certainty, and comfort which in former times were satisfied by the idea of God.

In his essay on "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens was later to remark:

> while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly.

The statement, like nearly all of Stevens' prose meditations, is an attempt to make explicit the theory that governed his poetry from the start; and together with his remark that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written," it provides a frame for Stevens' own great poem of the earth. It may be that Stevens nowhere comes closer than in "Sunday Morning" to "enacting the possibilities for human self-renewal." It is certain that here, in a poem that was composed so early in his poetic career, Stevens has already created one of those major works that were to recur throughout his canon: a poem shaped in the image of the Supreme Fiction, looming over the lesser lyrics that surround it like that magical tree of reality in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," which

> *stands gigantic, with a certain tip*
> *To which all birds come sometime in their time*
> *But when they go that tip still tips the tree.*

As usual with Stevens' work, the title provides a complex gloss on the poem that follows it; and those who have considered Stevens' titles either merely frivolous or somehow irrelevant to his texts have missed one of the widest portals into his rich world. Sunday, of course, is a day of meditation particularly important to Stevens, who could play his harmonium only during such spare moments as his quotidian responsibilities might allow. The day is also God's day, and the poem is concerned with prescribing the manner of celebrating God—or rather, what "a God might be"—in the modern world. The importance of this point can hardly be exaggerated, since for Stevens, no less than for Matthew Arnold, the salient function of art was one we may legitimately call a religious function. As Stevens put it in the "Adagia,"

> The relation of art to life is of the first importance
> especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of
> a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations
> and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point
> of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate
> and invalidate, for the support that they give.

It was Stevens' conviction that although we can, if only because we must, learn to live without God, we cannot, if we are to remain human, live without the satisfactions that belief in God could formerly provide. Whatever else religion of more devout ages than our own may have done, it did at least supply substance for visions grander than the empiricism of the present age has been able to achieve; and although Stevens seems never to have suffered anguish over the loss of God, he did consider it the burden and the privilege of the poet to rescue from that loss values which man requires and may attain even without God.

On another, less obvious but equally important level, the title reminds us that Sunday is the day of the sun, and that the sun has quite logically been considered in most primitive societies to be the life-giver, the emblem of fertility and procreation. If "Sunday Morning" is a celebration of life, a hymn to things as they are, it is also a poem of potential and renewal, a sermon on things as they might be, an instance of that "world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or  from the world in which we shall come to live." And finally, as Stevens was later to write, "poetry is like prayer in that it is most effective in solitude and in times of solitude, as, for example, in the earliest morning."

"Sunday Morning," then, is a visionary poem; indeed, we might call it the ultimate projection of the romantic vision into the twentieth century. The importance of "Sunday Morning" to Stevens' subsequent poetry is that, although he would never again find it possible to pay, without irony and without qualification, such exultant homage to the sun, "symbol of the good which  is synonymous with God," the remainder of his work would nevertheless be devoted to the attempt, at times comic, at times ironic, at times heroically triumphant, to create a poetry of exaltation, yet a poetry which is, as he came to think the work of the *Harmonium* period was not, attuned to modern reality. It is Stevens' faith in the possibility of making poetry out of the world as seen in the clear

light of reality, out of the Platonic sun that is the source of all knowledge and all truth□the possibility of metamorphosing, somehow without distortion, things as they palpably are into things as the imagination wills them to be□that is the solid core of his most lofty aspiration.

Although the structure of "Sunday Morning" takes the loose shape of meditation and association, not the rigid form of logic, its pattern of thought and feeling, unlike that of many of Stevens' meditative poems, does move toward resolution. The female protagonist suffers at the start the quiet unrest which loss of those consolations attainable through faith in Christ has stirred in her; in the course of the subsequent dialogue between her longings for "some imperishable bliss" and the poet's assurances that transience is all and is enough, she is drawn from religious yearnings to an acceptance of a world without God. Thus, when with the closing image of "casual flocks of pigeons" which, at evening, make

*Ambiguous undulations as they sink,*
*Downward to darkness, on extended wings,*

the fact of death is again brought into the foreground, it is no longer a source of terror or unrest, nor does it inspire religious intimations of immortality; now "Death is the mother of beauty," and, as in Keats, through acceptance of earthly transience we are wedded most passionately to the beauty we are certain we must lose.

How many we refine from earth itself sufficient compensation for that "imperishable bliss" promised by heaven? The process begins subtly before the argument of the poem is engaged. Here is one of the few poems by Stevens in which there is no obvious reference, either direct or metaphoric, to poetry itself; yet the opening stanza serves brilliantly to illustrate what in "Three Academic Pieces" Stevens argues to be the singular quality that elevates poetry above other pleasurable things: poetry, he argues there, by revealing "a partial similarity between dissimilar things," intensifies and makes more brilliant the particular element of their similarity. "When the similarity is between things of adequate dignity," he goes on,

the resemblance may be said to transfigure or sublimate
them. Take, for example, the resemblance between
reality and any projection of it in belief or in
metaphor. What is it that these two have in common?
Is not the glory of the idea of any future state a relation
between a present and a future glory? The brilliance
of the earth is the brilliance of every paradise.

Just as the two closing sentences of this passage constitute a prose summary of one of the central themes of "Sunday Morning," so the argument that precedes them serves to explain the method of the opening stanza. The lady is neither a person nor even a *persona;* she is simply the projection of a mood which, were it to take on a palpable being of its own, would resemble the feminine image Stevens here projects. It should not surprise us, then, if beneath the lady's peignoir we find no flesh. Similarly, her rich

ambience is designed not so much to provide "real toads in imaginary gardens" as to foreshadow the imaginative aggrandizement of the material world through which we may come to see that "The brilliance of the earth is the brilliance of every paradise."

The associative richness of the opening stanza is nearly inexhaustible, and within it reality and its metaphoric projection become nearly inseparable. The coffee, oranges, and cockatoo, which at first, as sensual comforts and tokens of a luxuriant mood,

 *mingle to dissipate*
*The holy hush of ancient sacrifice,*

become, as the lady's imagination weaves them into dream, into poetry, "things in some procession of the dead," a procession in which the dreamer herself, as if enchanged by her own images, finds herself taking part:

*The day is like wide water, without sound,*
*Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet*
*Over the seas, to silent Palestine,*
*Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.*

All roads in the first stanza lead to Palestine, to the lady's meditations on Christ; she, like the earthly riches that surround her, is in reality a thing "in some procession of the dead," for she is mortal; "the pungent oranges and bright green wings" of the cockatoo become, through their tropical associations, fit imaginative companions for her southern journey; and finally, the similarity between the gentle violation of her somnolent mood by thoughts of the Crucifixion ("the dark/ Encroachment of that old catastrophe") and the almost imperceptible manner in which "a calm darkens among water lights," leads her thoughts to Palestine as silently and as surely as Christ himself walked upon the water.

What has occurred in the first stanza is that, in constructing her metaphysical poem, the lady has given "her bounty to the dead." Indeed, her creative act is precisely the kind later rejected by Crispin, "that poetic hero without palms/ Or jugglery," whose

*violence was for aggrandizement*
*And not for stupor, such as music makes*
*For sleepers halfway waking.*

The lady's imagination and her heart's need having filled her mind with "the holy hush of ancient sacrifice," the second voice, as gentle as the movement of her mind, yet less passive, less feminine, is introduced. Its argument is untouched by any skepticism against her need, but is rather concerned with establishing an alternate solace to the religious comfort she has sought in Christ. And its opening question provides what is at once a delicately articulated transition and an example of Stevens' most subtle wit:

*Why should she give her bounty to the dead?*
*What is divinity if it can come*
*Only in silent shadows and in dreams?*

*Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,*
*In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else*
*In any balm or beauty of the earth*
*Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?*

The fruit, the wings, initially synecdoches for "the balm or beauty of the earth," transported her from their own reality to another balm, the balm of heaven. Yet that more orthodox comforting, although itself mothered by the imagination, depends, as it has always done, on the denial of the poem of earth. The earth, from whose substance we have woven our visionary paradises, is paradise enough to those with sufficient feeling to be *alive* in it.

In an era whose intense self-consciousness has led to an ever-widening alienation from the objective world, Stevens, who is at times the most solipsistic of modern poets, returned in "Sunday Morning" to Coleridge's concept of the "One Life," a poetic and epistemological state to be entered only when "A poet's heart and intellect [are] combined and unified with the great appearances of nature and not merely held in solution and loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal similes." Our divinity consists in an awareness of the "One Life," in our capacity, as Stevens puts it elsewhere, for "Celebrating the marriage/ Of flesh and air," not a marriage of man and God but one whose rituals are celebrated in the closing lines of the second stanza□a marriage of the human and divine within man, to be consummated through an imaginative capacity to unite ourselves with the earth:

*Divinity must live within herself:*
*Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;*
*Grieving in lonelines, or unsubdued*
*Elations when the forest blooms; gusty*
*Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;*
*All pleasures and all pains, remembering*
*The bough of summer and the winter branch.*
*These are the measures destined for her soul.*

As the second stanza rejects the shadowy bliss of heaven for the certain pleasures (and the certain pains) of earth, the third elaborates the Blakean motto: "All deities reside in the human breast." Just as our emotions may unite us with the paradise of earth, so may the imaginative power with which we created the gods fit us with the requisite dignity to live in this paradise. The argument of the stanza becomes clear enough when we realize that Stevens is in effect quoting scripture to his purpose. The concept of divinity, here emblemized by Jove, becomes a fruitful concept only *after* men have created myths that wed the human to the divine. These myths, conceived out of our hunger for divine magnificence, for breaching the gap between the real and the ideal, comprise, as Stevens knew with Blake, our earliest poetry; born out of longing for the superhuman, these myths conceived in their turn new symbols of human superhumanity, emblemized by the constellations in which Jove's discarded mistresses achieved immortality. Although Stevens confines his argument to classical mythology, the analogy with Christianity is apparent. Christ, too, Stevens reminds us by implication,

was born out of our de- sire to commingle the human and divine; and in the Christian myth as in the pagan, the success of that commingling was symbolized by a star. In both cases, a god has come down to man, and man has in turn been elevated to the heavens.

Stevens' treatment of these myths, it should be apparent, is unmarked by either hostility or cynicism toward religion. He sees religious myths rather as the products of timeless human needs which must be satisfied in a post-religious era no less than in the earlier ages of faith. In short, we still require the transcendental imagination that went into the making of our gods, as it still goes into the making of our poetry. But in a naturalistic universe, the earth itself is the only paradise and the most proximate immortality we can know. Thus, lest "our blood fail," it is through a wedding of our blood to the earth that we can experience the contentment we once experienced in the hope of heaven:

*The sky will be much friendlier then than now,*
*A part of labor and a part of pain,*
*And next in glory to enduring love,*
*Not this dividing and indifferent blue.*

Through our recognition that the earth is "all of paradise that we shall know" we may come at last to be at home in it□this is the truth visible in the clear light of the sun; this is the attachment to life which for Stevens, as for Camus, only the acceptance of the finality of death can bring.

The dialogue does not end, however, with this lofty conception. The lady, who is not, after all, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" but a facet of Stevens' own mind, still demands some satisfaction for the fundamental theistic craving for permanence:

*She says, "I am content when wakened bids,*
*Before they fly, test the reality*
*Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;*
*But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields*
*Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"*

The answer is direct and its limpid rhetoric is persuasive: there is no visionary heaven

*that has endured As April's green endures; or will endure*
*Like her remembrance of awakened birds,*
*Or her desire for June and evening, tipped*
*By the consummation of the swallow's wings.*

Once more the poetry of earth is pitted against that of heaven, and its superiority. Stevens insists, stems from its permanence *as* reality. We are reminded, although he would hardly rejoice in the context of our reminiscence, of Dr. Johnson's injunction to a bereaved friend:

Let us endeavor to see things as they are, and then
enquire whether we ought to complain. Whether to

see life as it is will give us much consolation, I know
not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth,
if any there be, is solid and durable; that which may
be derived from errour must be, like its original, falacious
and fugitive.

To say that the Keatsian fifth stanza is repetitive would be to miss the key fact of the poem's structure, for "Sunday Morning" is, like most of Stevens' longer poems, a set of variations on a theme. Indeed, the lady's final reiteration of the need expressed in the stanza's opening lines ("But in contentment I still feel/ The need of some imperishable bliss") illustrates a technique with which the reader of Stevens becomes increasingly familiar: it is a flat statement of what, in the opening lines of stanza four, was uttered in metaphor. Similarly, the lines that follow in the stanza offer a metaphor for the vision of earth as paradise that is parallel to the vision earlier embodied in the image of the weakened birds. Poetry, Stevens has said, is an "abstraction blooded," and it is clear enough that the abstraction here blooded is that "Death is the mother of beauty." Not so clear, however, is the idea behind lines 13 and 14, in which death "causes boys to pile new plums and pears/ On disregarded plate." The intended meaning of these lines would indeed be impossible to determine with any confidence were it not for Harriet Monroe's objection to them when Stevens submitted the poem to her in 1915. "The words 'On disregarded plate' in No. 5," Stevens wrote to her in reply,

are, apparently, obscure. Plate is used in the sense of
so-called family plate. Disregarded refers to the disuse
into which things fall that have been possessed
for a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases
and renews. What the old have come to disregard,
the young inherit and make use of. Used in these
senses, the words have a value in the lines which I
find difficult to retain in any change. Does this explanation
help? Or can you make any suggestion? I
ask this because your criticism is clearly well
founded.

The lines might read,

She causes boys to bring sweet-smelling pears,
And plums in ponderous piles. The maidens taste
And stray etc.

But such a change is somewhat pointless. I should
prefer the lines unchanged, although, if you like the
variations proposed, for the sake of clearness, I
should be satisfied.

Miss Monroe like the variation proposed, and Stevens was satisfied, although in the revised lines he indeed lost the value he originally intended. When we consider the

weight of meaning Stevens himself piled on the "disregarded plate," meaning which no unaided reader could possibly taste, it should neither surprise nor dismay us that certain images and even certain poems throughout his work must remain obscure.

With the sixth stanza the current quickens as it carries the argument toward resolution. The permanence we pine for is the static permanence of death:

*Is there no change of death in paradise?*
*Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs*
*Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,*
*Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,*
*With rivers like our own that seek for seas*
*They never find, the same receding shores*
*That never touch with inarticulate pang?*

A paradise in which all is consummated is a paradise without consummation; a paradise in which all desire is satisfied is a paradise of ennui:

*Why set the pear upon those river banks*
*Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?*

We may break Stevens' argument down into three essential points: (1) The most radiant paradise we can conceive is one in which earth's brilliant beauty is perpetual□that is, a paradise in which neither nature nor man is subject to change and death. Essentially, this is the paradise Milton depicts in the prelapsarian Eden. (2) Precisely because the beauty of such a paradise *is* changeless and immortal, it would provide none of the emotional intensity that earthly beauty provides; for that intensity has its source in our awareness that earth's bounties are not ours forever. (3) By extension were we to enjoy, on earth *or* in heaven, that which we most passionately crave□"imperishable bliss"□ we would, paradoxically, be robbed of bliss altogether, and be bound instead to the endless reexperiencing of pleasures that would become steadily more cloying through repetition.

Thus, with a cogency never achieved by Dr. Pangloss, Stevens completes his demonstration that this is indeed, the imminence of death notwithstanding, the best of all possible worlds. Nor is it difficult to imagine Stevens' reply to those dark lines of Yeats: "Man is in love and loves what vanishes,/ What more is there to say?" There remains to say, Stevens might have said, that is man were *not* in love with what vanishes, he would not be capable of loving at all. This, in effect, is the argument with which the stanza closes:

*Death is the mother of beauty, mystical*
*Within those burning bosom we devise*
*Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.*

Death mothers beauty because without awareness of death we would not learn the nurture of our earthly mother, the physical beauty of the world itself, a beauty that is "sleepless" and divine, unlike the hollow divinity that comes "Only in silent shadows and in dreams." The seventh stanza of the poem might take for its motto Nietzsche's

statement that "We have produced the hardest possible thought; now let us create the creature who will accept it lightheartedly and blissfully." The symbolic ceremony of devotion to the life-source that the stanza so grandly describes is not, as Yvor Winters would maintain, a projection of finicky hedonism, but rather an expression of faith in the possible heavenly fellowship of those Nietzschean creatures, "Of men that perish and of summer morn," of men content with the knowledge that

*whence they come and whither they shall go*
*The dew upon their feet shall manifest.*

Nor would it seem a token of spiritual ennui that this poem in celebration of "an old chaos of the sun" should end with an evocation of death in life and life in death the nobility and scrupulous integrity of whose rhetoric requires no gloss:

*Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail*
*Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;*
*Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;*
*And, in the isolation of the sky,*
*At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make*
*Ambiguous undulations as they sink,*
*Downward to darkness on extended wings.*

The cockatoo of the first stanza, the "green wings" of the second, the "wakened birds" of the fourth, achieve synthesis in the "casual flocks of pigeons" whose sinking undulations bring the poem to a close. The lady *does*, in the end, give her bounty to the dead after all; not, however, as she had done initially, by sacrificing sensual experience to the falsifying hope of immortality, but by accepting transience as the necessary condition of our humanity and of our sense of beauty.

Skeptical, yet inspired by a passionate faith, contemporary, yet rooted in a primitive conception of the three-fold tie that binds nature, man, and divinity into an exultant harmony anomalous in an age that conceives "nature" as that which one beholds on picnics, and an age in which the idea of human potential for divinity has become repugnant to humanist and theist alike, "Sunday Morning" stands in the garden of contemporary poetry like some great exotic flowering tree transported into a municipal park by an eccentric millionaire.

Yet the fact remains that "Sunday Morning" *is* an exotic, whose beauty and whose power, as Stevens himself would shortly come to believe, had their nurture in a climate and an age remote from our own. Randall Jarrell came close to recognizing this point when he remarked of the poem that in it "is the last purity and refinement of the grand style, as perfect, in its calm transparency, as the best of Wordsworth□" But for the achievement of that purity and refinement, Stevens was forced to pay a price. In "Sunday Morning" he does not, as he was later to say that the poet must, "move constantly in the direction of the credible." That "ring of men" chanting in orgy "Their boisterous devotion to the sun" may stir us, but will not for long, even as metaphor, win from us a "willing suspension of disbelief." Moreover, Jarrell's reference to "the last

purity and refinement of the grand style" is in itself, however unintentionally, but ambiguous praise: Stevens' richly articulated blank verse marks the *end* of a technical tradition, just as his insistence on our source in nature marks the end of a spiritual one. Stevens, like Picasso, began his mature artistic career with mastery of the received tradition; insofar as the vital artist is a pioneer, however, such mastery can bring stasis as leaden as that of a changeless paradise itself. To a degree, then, "Sunday Morning" is at once masterpiece and dead end; and our final response to the poem will be tempered by our recollection of Stevens' own subsequent remarks on Verrocchio's statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni:

One feels the passion of rhetoric begin to stir and
even to grow furious; and one thinks that, after all,
the noble style, in whatever it creates, merely perpetuates
the noble style. In this statue, the apposition
between the imagination and reality is too favorable
to the imagination.

"Sunday Morning" is the point of embarkation for the aesthetic voyaging of Crispin, the poetclown who was to be Stevens' most ambitious vehicle for self-satire. Toward the close of his voyage, shortly before he abandons poetic theory and practice for domestic tranquility, Crispin turns against his own visions, visions of which "Sunday Morning" was the consummate embodiment:

*These bland excursions into time to come,*
*Related in romance to backward flights,*
*However prodigal, however proud,*
*Contained in their afflatus the reproach*
*That first drove Crispin to his wandering.*
*He could not be content with counterfeit,*
*With masquerade of thought, with shapeless words*
*That must belie the racking masquerade,*
*With fictive flourishes that preordained*
*His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree*
*Of buttons, measure of his salt. Such trash*
*Might help the blind, not him, serenely sly.*
*It irked his patience.*

One wonders whether any obsession can more unsettle the writer of poetry than the indispensable obsession with truth, whether any curiosity can make his task of creation more difficult than curiosity about the ultimate nature of reality. Were Stevens the aesthetic fop that so many contemporaneous readers of *Harmonium* believed him to be, he would have found no grounds for distrusting the romantic incantations of "Sunday Morning"□although it is probable that he would have found no inspiration to write it. His difficulty was that the only poetry he could find ultimately satisfying was poetry of a kind that neither his own skepticism nor the hard contours of the modern world would countenance. For all its impassioned dignity, "Sunday Morning" is, in its primitivism,

"Related in romance to backward flights"; for all the beauty of its evocation, it is, as poetry must be, as tenuous in its sanctions as those birdsongs of which the lady says:

*"I am content when wakened birds*
*Before they fly, test the reality*
*Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;*
*But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields*
*Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"*

And for all the artistry of its rhetoric, it is "counterfeit"; it offers a verbal and philosophical masquerade that may have been workaday costume in the past and could conceivably become so again in the future, but which cannot but distort the present reality, and cannot help but preordain, for him who chooses to wear it, "passion's permit, hang of coat, degree/ Of buttons, measure of his salt"□for to adopt the style of a former tradition is perforce to adopt its vision. Excursions such as "Sunday Morning" must come to seem bland to those inclined to mistrust the comforts of an outworn romantic tradition. The grand style revived was not, for Stevens, what the modern poem had to be: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice"; it is rather the reiteration of a satisfaction already found, a repetition of "what/ Was already in the script."

**Source:** Herbert J. Stern, "Adam's Dream," in *Wallace Stevens: Art of Uncertainty*, University of Michigan Press, 1966, pp. 87-104.

# Adaptations

*Wallace Stevens: Voice of a Poet*, released by Random House in March 2002, features poetry read by Stevens himself.

# Topics for Further Study

Draw an illustration of the opening scene of the poem, as the woman is contentedly lounging at home.

T. S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land* also deals with the subject of Christianity. Compare and contrast Eliot's view on this subject with that of Stevens in "Sunday Morning."

Construct an argument that a Christian would use that would counter that offered in the poem. You could begin by insisting that the imperishable bliss the woman is seeking could only come from a devotion to Christian dogma and ceremonies.

Define and research the practices of ancient Greek religions. How are these ancient religions used in the poem?

# Compare and Contrast

**1920s:** The modernist writers during this period reflect Americans' growing sense of disillusionment with the tenets of Christianity. Many begin to question whether humanity is being protected by the presence and power of a benevolent God.

**Today:** After decades of focus on more secular activities, many Americans are returning to the Church, due to the devastating terrorist attacks in September 2001, which inspire a return to traditional values. A number of conservative Christian groups, usually referred to as the "religious right," are lobbying for a return of Christian ethics in schools, including a return to prayers in the classroom and the promotion of sexual abstinence in sex education classes.

**1920s:** The flapper, who presents a new, freer female image, becomes the model for young American women as they begin to express themselves more freely in terms of dress and behavior.

**Today:** Women make major gains in their fight for equality. Most American women feel free to express their individuality within and outside of the domestic sphere without bowing to the pressure of social strictures.

**1920s:** American poetry during this period often presents an austerely pessimistic view of contemporary society as a reaction to industrialization, urbanization, and technological innovations. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, becomes one of the most important poetic expressions of this theme.

**Today:** While often less obscure and allusive than the modernists, contemporary poets often continue what has come to be considered the pessimistic zeitgeist of the twentieth century. Their poetry frequently presents this theme in a stripped down form, reflecting the rhythms and diction of contemporary language.

# What Do I Read Next?

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1925) offers another poetic examination of loss of faith in Christianity. The poem is considered to be one of the finest examples of poetic modernism.

Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" (1936) presents a different view of reality through the consciousness of a woman.

*The Sun Also Rises* (1926), by Ernest Hemingway, one of the "lost generation" writers, focuses on a group of disillusioned Americans living in after World War I. Critics consider this novel to be the voice of its generation.

*Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s (The American Moment)* (1989), by David J. Goldberg, presents an overview of this fascinating decade and focuses specifically on how World War I affected American society.

# Further Study

Burney, William, "Wallace Stevens," in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.

Burney compares the voice of the central female character in "Sunday Morning" to that of other works by Stevens.

Doggett, Frank, and Robert Buttel, eds., *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, Princeton University Press, 1980.

This collection of articles focuses on the poetic talents of Stevens. In the preface, the editors comment that Stevens's themes and the "inescapable rhythms of his poems . . . are what give his work the important place it holds today and assure that it will be read long after the occasion of his centenary."

Litz, A. Walton, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens*, Oxford University Press, 1972.

In his analysis of the poem, Litz argues that "by remaining skeptical and open[it] connects with the widest range of our personal and cultural experience."

Maeder, Beverly, *Wallace Stevens' Experimental Language: The Lion in the Lute*, St. Martin's Press, 1999.

This critique focuses on how the poem's "several subject positions all confront the divine and spiritual with the earthly and bodily."

Newcomb, John Timberman, *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons*, University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

In his assessment of the poem, Newcomb asserts that its "subject matter, formal precision, and glorious blank-verse line all fostered the expectation of a strong affirmation of man's existence and artistry."

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□, "William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 973-92.

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BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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