

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

*Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite*

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ISSN 2278-9529

## Where Does Divinity Lie? A Critical Re-reading of the Poem “Sunday Morning” by Wallace Stevens

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**Article History:** Submitted-29/05/2017, Revised-25/06/2017, Accepted-30/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

### **Abstract:**

“Sunday Morning” is one of the most fascinating and thematically resonant poems of Wallace Stevens. It is one of the collected pieces from Wallace Stevens’s first book of poetry called *Harmonium*. It is a series of eight fifteen line stanzas. The first version of the poem was published in 1915 and then it was published in full in 1923. The poem unsettles and questions the traditional ways of perceiving religion and divinity which clearly reflects the modernist approach of the poet. Generally the poem is considered as an expression of paganism but the poem is much more than just an expression of paganism. It questions the complexity of our existence by posing serious questions about how our religious beliefs affect the way we perceive nature. The poet does not want us to reach an easy substitute but he wishes to make us realise the fact there is no ‘the’ particular way of understanding divinity. The poem explores various meanings and ways of interpreting the word “Nature”. Nature is many things in the poem. For the female protagonist nature is a source of beauty but at the same time nature also includes the forces of death and change. So one view which repeatedly runs throughout the poem is that the physical world an endless round of birth, death and the seasons is more lasting than any religion, myth or philosophy. The poem affirms that Death gives birth to new possibilities. It is an agent of change and revival. But along with these views the questions that perturb the mind of the female speaker in the poem is What would happen if we remain bereft of the protective cover of “Gods” ? Is there a scope for a new culture waiting for humans to embrace them? Do human beings turn into utter despair when they realise that there is no entity in this world to shield them? Are human beings ready to accept a new culture which is based upon the logic that Gods are the creation of human imagination. The poem compels us to immerse ourselves into the deeper meanings of the concepts of ‘divinity’, ‘religion’, ‘myth’ and ‘nature’. It works as an experiment to ask the world whether Nature possesses the power to provide us eternal bliss?

**Keywords:** religion, myth, God, nature, divinity, Christianity, death, paganism

Chaos is the term which is a central characteristic of modernism and the poem “Sunday Morning” celebrates chaos by subverting our beliefs about religion, nature, myth and above all divinity. What marks the poem as modern is its key theme of religious disbelief that has come to be recognized as a central theme of modernism. The objective of the paper is to offer a critical analysis and re-reading of the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘divinity’ in the poem *Sunday Morning* by focussing on the elucidation of the below mentioned questions.

The female speaker primarily meditates upon the following key questions in the poem

What is divinity

Where does it lie?

How does one achieve “imperishable bliss”.( Stevens 61-62)

The poem offers a meticulous analysis of the nature of divinity and its relationship with nature and established Christian notions of religion through the musings of a woman figure. The poem develops as a dramatic dialogue or an argument between two voices: The curious enquiring tones of the woman, whose enjoyment of the pleasures of this world is completely marred by the awareness of death and ruthlessness of nature as an entity and another voice that wishes to reassure her that the beauty of nature in and around her and the physical reality is sufficient to satiate her need for spiritual comfort. Both voices that of the young woman and the narrator can be thought of as aspects of the poet, of Stevens himself. The poem is a rumination, the record of a mind in dialogue with itself. In terms of aura and setting, the poem is motionless, unchanging from the first stanza to the last, although immense distances are travelled in terms of time and space through the disconcerting and ripening thoughts and fantasies of the woman figure and an unnamed speaker. The poem does not progress in the form of logical argument, heading step by step towards a convincing conclusion, rather it unfurls in a inscrutable pattern of random flow of thoughts and emotions of a woman’s mind.

### **Belief and Doubt as a major theme of the poem**

The sense of spiritual struggle and agony which is experienced by the woman throughout the poem is introduced right in the first stanza of the poem in the lines quoted here: “ She dreams a little / Encroachment of that old catastrophe, / As a calm darkens among water-lights.”(Stevens6-8).The title itself becomes a befitting thematic pun. On this Sunday Morning, a traditional Christian day which is meant to worship the son of god, a woman is enjoying day of nature’s sun. She instead spends a languid morning reposing in her peignoir, complacently indulging in the sensual pleasures of breakfast in a “sunny chair.”(Stevens2). The woman in the poem vacillates between belief and doubt as she enters into a dialogue with the poet about spiritual gratification. At the beginning of the poem, she appears to be content in her novel admiration of the earthly pleasures of the natural world. This world with its striking colors and leisurely breakfasts offers her a sense of freedom. Soon, however, doubt over this choice she has made this Sunday morning shatters her composure. As she adores the sensuality of nature, she experiences a growing awareness and angst of its transitory nature. She daydreams that she is travelling with a bunch of ghosts to the tomb of Palestine. 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 redemption. Religion does not let her completely enjoy the beauty of life. She experiences guilt about the fact that she is not attending church on a Sunday morning which disturbs her joy or delight which she experiences from immediate surroundings and this perplexing thought leads her to a deeper, minute and a sceptical meditation of the major questions posed in the poem. The first one is Which are the several ways of interpreting the word ‘religion’ or ‘divinity’, second is What

role does religion play in our lives and thirdly Is paganism a real religion or just a set of myths?

### **Disjuncture between Man and the Divine as a major theme of the poem**

The entire poem takes place inside the woman's head. Her inquisitive manner of asking questions informs the reader that she is not going to be easily pacified by any reasoning offered. The first few lines of the poem introduce the intrinsic conflict between nature and religion which is faced by the woman throughout the poem. Right from the second stanza of the poem the speaker questions the glory or importance of Christ which is reflected in the quoted lines: "What is divinity if it can come / only in silent shadows and dreams?"(Stevens17-18)The question though seemingly childish sets the tone of the poem. She challenges the greatness of god by wondering why she is not perturbed by the thoughts of Christianity all the time. It is only when her thoughts are not too much engrossed with nature and her immediate surroundings then the role of God comes to the forefront.

Further in the poem she presents her own version of perceiving divinity in the lines " Divinity must live within herself: / Passions of rain, or moods of falling snow; / Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued" (Stevens23-25)

According to her divinity has nothing to do with God or any higher power. For her divinity does not rely on the rituals and rules of a specific religion but it is hidden in the powerful emotions which she experiences from her intense involvement with nature in and around her. She seeks unfeigned spiritual solace in the natural world which can be inferred from the following lines:

Shall she not find it in comforts of the sun  
In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else  
In any beauty or balm of the earth,  
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (Stevens19-22)

She can love or cherish things in nature just as much as she enjoys the idea of heaven. In these lines the speaker tries to bring everyday things or her immediate surroundings on an equal level with spirituality. So divinity is hidden deep within your soul and it is not merely limited to the altar of a church. But in fourth stanza we see a major dilemma faced by the speaker when 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?" (Stevens46-50)

On one hand woman figure extols the powers of nature and raises it above the religious and mythical fantasies of paradise. Nature is a kind of heaven for her but she is immediately disheartened by the fact that though natural beauty provides her comfort and happiness but at

the same time it brings back the realisation that nothing is permanent in this world. So birds, morning, sunshine, warm fields and all sublime visions which are part of human imagination are going to end some day. The major twist in the poem comes with the thought when the woman says: "But in contentment I still feel/ The need of some imperishable bliss." (Stevens61-62)The beauty of nature fails to provide her " the imperishable bliss" (Stevens62)which she desires. So her thoughts actually come back to the original idea of Christian heaven because she thinks that there is a logic to why people should believe in the concept of Christian heaven because it is eternal.

### **Origin of Myth and it's link with the concept of Paradise**

In the third stanza, the speaker traces the evolution of religion to suggest that no natural connections exist between religious myths and the world.

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. (Stevens 31-38)

The speaker compares Christianity with Greek and roman gods who had their origins in natural phenomena. So here in these lines he is not just talking about the birth of Jove but he is also talking about the birth of the idea of Jove; indicating the origin of myth. "Mythy mind" refers to the source and creator of all myths. 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 create 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".(Stevens 45)Humans can never wish to establish a true unison with the object of their devotion considering the stringent hierarchical nature of conventional religious practices.

Further the poet enquires about the nature of myths and their relation with the concept of paradise by asking "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?" (Stevens39-41)In these lines we become aware of a very significant idea in the context of the poem which is that common folks are responsible for giving birth to the myth of Jove. In other words they give life or "blood" to the myth. So when the poet asks, Shall our blood fail?" (Stevens 39) he is questioning whether our stories and myths about nature might fail to give us the same kind of

spiritual contentment as the belief in paradise. The second alternative is that our awareness about the origins of myth allows us to consider nature as a kind of heaven. But if we view nature and earth as being like paradise, then there might be a doubt that “And shall the earth / Seem all of the paradise that we shall know? (Stevens 40-41) The doubt of the author clearly indicates that there should be some power which moves beyond the limits of nature or earth which satisfies “the need of imperishable bliss.” (Stevens 61-62) experienced by the woman in the poem. So the third stanza of the poem highlights a critical theme for the readers i.e religions are myths that are derived from human imagination.

### **Affirmation of Death as an agent of Change and Renewal**

When the woman speaker in the poem complains that even while experiencing contentment in her relationship to the natural world, she feels “the need of some imperishable bliss,” (Stevens 61-62) which Christianity insists can be found only in complete devotion to the church. The unnamed speaker in the poem counters by asserting that she can experience true contentment only through the appreciation of that which is ephemeral which can be inferred in these lines “ Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone shall come fulfilment to our dreams”.(Stevens63-64)The second voice in the poem accepts death as a natural part of life. The poet insists that it is the human consciousness of time and the inevitability of death within time that makes things beautiful; that is the only beauty humans may know. The experience of the painful fact that we are going to lose something, the very mortality of beings causes us to love, appreciate and value things around us. Pain and pleasure are inseparable in the eyes of the mother of beauty. One of the most enchanting images of the poem is when the speaker conveys through an image that Death besides being a symbol of loss also makes us experience beauty. The lines are “She causes boys to pile new plums and pears / On disregarded plate. The maidens taste / And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.”(Stevens 73-75)The plate in the family heritage has been forgotten. Fortunately the cycle of death brings something new to take its place: boys can use the plate to pile up fresh fruit for beautiful maidens to eat.

Rather than giving a realistic description of heaven, the poet demonstrates how difficult it would be to imagine a world without change in the following lines:

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 (Stevens76-81)

The speaker continues in his praise of death, which eventually amounts to praise of change and the cycle of generations. He enquires what paradise would be like if there is “no change of death”, (Stevens 76) which is how Christian heaven is supposed to be. If fruits become ripe but never fall, if things are born but never die, if rivers flow but never reach the ocean, if there is only everlasting happiness and no opposite to give it meaning then it is not at all

worthwhile and desirable to seek for such a place. By portraying such images the poet wants to convey an idea emphatically that all the things are permanently divided in heaven, nothing ever reaches its goal in heaven which is a very unfortunate phenomena. If such is the case then heaven wouldn't be better than earth rather it would be the same. The speaker here emphasizes an important reality that religions have explicated a vision of the paradise which is similar to earthly paradise but it is immutable and eternal. One of the predominant themes of the poem is the idea that human perception of beauty requires the realization that everything on earth is transitory. Everyone will die and everything will change; so we must recognize immortality as a deception. What is perpetual is the recurring cycle of life and death. Christianity, Hinduism, or any religion promising eternality, is false because it envisages a paradise that is something like our earth but without the innate changes in earth's life and circumstance. In fact, this physical world, a ceaseless round of birth, death and the seasons, is the ultimate truth of life. Religion, myths, philosophies, and cultures are all figment of imagination and fade away. To discover that there never has been any superlunary world is like achieving the enlightened vision. Lack of knowledge on death stimulates the imagination's attempt to understand it. We appease ourselves with our own spectacular visions of the end of life, and those visions tell us how to live. In other words, we should not separate life and death, or heaven and earth. By the absolute force of our abilities to dream and believe, we should integrate them into a changing, enigmatic totality. So in this stanza the poet derides the idea that paradise must symbolize everlasting flawlessness.

### **Disruptive meaninglessness of Nature as a subversive end of the poem**

The end of the poem is subversive because the poem does not end with "boisterous devotion" (Stevens 91) of the pagan males who deem Sun as their God in stanza 7. Instead the poem ends on poignant and an elegiac note in eighth stanza by affirming vulnerability and meaninglessness of man's existence where human beings remain "unsponsored". (Stevens 112)

The moment of enlightenment for the female speaker comes in the last stanza

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." (Stevens 106-109)

There is a transfiguration in her thoughts when we look back at stanza 1 where she imagines that she will cross the ocean and join the spirits at the tomb of Christ. But, now, she hears a voice that says, specifically that there are no spirits. Christ's tomb in Palestine is not some mystical place; it is just a grave where a dead person named Jesus was entombed. With these lines, the poem comes full circle, returning to the scene of its first stanza; like the natural paradise of which it speaks, "Sunday Morning" is circular. Yet, within the fixed framework of that circle, there has been change; Jesus has attained a life like quality, Jesus died; so will all human beings; yet life will move on, and this is the paradise that humans are aware of Earth itself turns into heaven. The seminal point to be noted in the poem is that the female speaker is not looking at Jesus in an ironic or satirical manner rather she earnestly tries to

think about what the tomb of Jesus represents at the moment without any indication to the concept of paradise. She realises that a tomb is just a site of burial and nothing more.

Lastly towards the end of the poem Nature is viewed from an entirely new perspective when we compare it to earlier stanzas where it is portrayed as a powerful entity which has survived or lasted longer than any religious ideas about heaven and a source of beauty but in the last stanza it is viewed as an anarchic stand an inhuman entity in the lines:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,  
Or old dependency of day and night,  
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,  
Of that wide water inescapable.(Stevens 110-113)

Nature is an anarchist because it doesn't have an ultimate purpose. On one hand, it liberates us of the claims from any particular religion or gods. It makes us feel autonomous and unrestricted. On the other hand nature is considered as completely apathetic to people. Humanity is like an island surrounded by "wide water" (Stevens 113) or ocean which is a symbol for everything unfathomable and impersonal in the world.

A keen reading of the poem gives us an idea that the poem cannot be clearly and easily categorised as an expression of paganism because the poet does not wish to give the readers a clear cut conclusion. The last two stanzas which in a way summarize the poem express two different views of the world. Stanza 7 is inspirational in tone because it offers a ray of hope to the woman in the poem that one can find paradise in the splendour and charm of nature. It describes a novel paganism in which men will worship the physical universe, the reborn pagan males strive to emulsify with the life source, submitting their individuality to its larger identity which can be inferred from the lines:

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.(Stevens 91-95)

The poet points out that the sun is not a "god" but only similar to god. The sun is not godhead but it is a source of life on earth. Nature does not establish a pecking order that disconnects it from humanity. The god of nature appears naked among the men "like a savage source" (Stevens 95) intermingling with their blood. They know full well the inevitability of death and rebirth and so celebrate the present beauty and magnanimity of nature.

But in stanza no.8 nature rather shifts towards the themes of alienation and separation when the woman realises that she alone is a part of "unsponsored" (Stevens 112) nature but the freedom attained by the woman by forswearing her Christian faith does not satiate her thirst for "imperishable bliss". (Stevens 61-62) Instead she comes to terms with the feeble nature of humans and the indifference of nature which is reflected in the following quoted lines:



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.(Stevens 114-120)

The final image of the pigeons in the sky links all the loose ends of the poem. The woman wonders about birds right from the beginning of the poem. Initially she thinks about the green cockatoo, then she thinks about the group of birds about to take off in the morning. Now these images portray nature in a majestic manner but the final image of the poem leads us to obscurity, darkness and unpredictability because the poet says that pigeons are ambiguous because they are flying at odd hours that is in the night. So pigeons with their “ extended wings” (Stevens 120) will at the end meet darkness which figuratively leads us to the interpretation that the woman also has accepted the anarchy or chaos of this world which does not gift us with any particular or specific ideologies which will make us eternally contented. There are four images in the last stanza which strongly reinforce the absurdity and meaninglessness of our existence one is the tomb of Jesus which is merely a cave, an old chaos of the sun which is visible in the birds crying for no reason and deer walking upon the mountains and casual flocks of pigeons. The last stanza actually repudiates the strong assertion of man’s existence by implying that such an affirmation was no more than an concoction of human mind which tended to dissipate once the scope of vision was widened to include the inhumane realities of the earth. There is a dramatic realization in the woman’s mind that in the face of conundrum of death we create a utopian world based on worldly sights.

### **Conclusion:**

The focus of Wallace Stevens is on Christianity, but he more than that signals that the predicament of beliefs has broadened beyond any one religious system to encompass all religions throughout history. For Stevens, poetry takes over another facet or plane of religious experience. Poetry takes over Christianity's traditional concern with absolution– with questions about the afterlife, paradise – the transcendental. How can a society conceive the transcendental in a non-transcendental world? How can it imagine the mystical in a non-mystical world? How can we have Heaven if we don't have God? These are all intriguing questions raised in Stevens's poetry. By portraying the figure of a woman who genuinely wishes to seek for spiritual fulfilment and her musings as well as questions help the reader to delve deep into their own consciousness and attempts to subvert our beliefs about the concepts of religion, divinity, paradise etc. Wallace Stevens lived in an epoch when religious authority was being deconstructed at an precipitating pace, and as a poet he presumed that it was his obligation to tackle the resulting spiritual void. So a reader of “Sunday Morning” is encouraged to find sagacity in the world of sense impressions that Stevens offers as earthly substitutes for ethereal bliss. The woman figure in the poem realises that by outrightly discarding Christianity will not offer her easy answers and gradually in her quest for spiritual

hunger she comes to terms with a more dreadful reality of life that one also cannot rely on Nature in the role of saviour and as a better alternative for the traditional Christian religion. Nature makes us feel that we are our own boss but at the same time the last stanza of the poem illustrates the ruthless and the grim aspect of nature as an entity through several plaintive images. The poem attempts to bring a paradigm shift in the approach and the underlying assumptions of all the modern age readers by reinvestigating and at the same time broadening our conception about the themes of divinity and religion. The woman accepts the ambiguous fate of pigeons in the last stanza, she comprehends the fact that all the things we adore will fade away one day, in the same manner the poet also exhorts us to realize that we should also have the audacity to descend into the unknown, to grabble through shadows in search of our own meanings and gods. We should have the ability to stand by and rely on our own philosophies and sensible thoughts instead of depending on the crutches of established religious dictums and philosophies.

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