Stevens' Mother and "Sunday Morning"

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"Sunday Morning" is commonly viewed as a renunciation of Christianity, or of any supernatural religion, in favor of what one might call a religion of reality, a worshipping of things palpable and real. In a recent article, however, Joy Pohl has shown that Stevens' poem reflects a much more ambivalent attitude towards this theme. She argues that although the poem attempts "to substitute for faith a kind of pantheism which celebrates immersion in physical sensation," the rhetoric and imagery of the poem belie that aim: "'Sunday Morning' attests eloquently to the failure of these efforts." Although Pohl concludes that the poem's ambivalence "is no doubt the product of a deep ambiguity in Stevens himself, the conflict produced between the intensity of his reactions to the natural world and the somber religiosity in his upbringing,"[1] she does not explore the origins of this conflict in Stevens' relationship with his mother, a devout Christian, who died on July 16, 1912, just three years before the publication of the poem.

Stevens grew up in a decidedly religious home, of which his mother was the cynosure. She instilled in Stevens, if not a commitment to Christianity, at least a knowledge of Christianity's tenets. Stevens recalls this aspect of his childhood in a letter to his wife shortly before his mother's death:

> I remember how she always read a chapter from the Bible every night to all of us when we were ready for bed. Often, one or two of us fell asleep. She always maintained an active interest in the Bible, and found there the solace she desired[.][2]

In addition to this religious training at home, Stevens attended parochial schools until high school. Although there is no evidence that Stevens treasured these teachings as a youth, it is clear that they left a mark on him, for, as his *Letters* reveal, he attended Sunday masses regularly and, at least until March 1907, recited his "prayers every night" (*L* 96).

Despite Stevens' firm Christian upbringing, he evinces at several points before the writing of "Sunday Morning" a disillusionment with the Christian promises and solaces that his mother cherished. The first and the most vague of these hints at disillusionment surfaces in a journal entry for April 30, 1905, a year after he was admitted to the bar and about ten years before he wrote "Sunday Morning":

> I am in an odd state of mind to-day. It is Sunday. I feel a loathing (large + vague!), for things as they are; and this is the result of a pretty thorough disillusionment. Yet this is an ordinary mood with me in town in the Spring time. I say to myself that there is nothing good in the world except physical well-being. All the rest is philosophical compromise. Last Sunday, at home, I took communion. It was from the worn, the sentimental, the diseased, the priggish and the ignorant that "Gloria in excelsis!" came. (*L* 82)

Here Stevens expresses something close to disdain for those drawn to Christianity, calling them "worn," "sentimental," "diseased," "priggish," and "ignorant." One year later, in a journal entry recounting a solitary walk, Stevens indicates even further his growing dissatisfaction with his inherited faith: "I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith" (*L* 86). Finally, one year after that, he states openly in a letter to his fiancée that "I am not in the least religious" (*L* 96).

During this period of religious skepticism Stevens took numerous walks wherever he happened to be, always reveling in the beauty of his natural surroundings and often, as his journals indicate, recording his impressions afterward:

> winter birds on winter branches, summer birds on summer branches, green mountains . . . (*L* 85)

> Then I noticed the way patches of trees stood on hill-sides, and couldn't think even of a simile. Then I found some pussy willows, the first of the year—and some yellow river willows. . . . A bird on a telephone wire turned its tail toward the wind and seemed to enjoy the raking. Good old fellow! (*L* 86)

Twice in his epistolary musings on nature Stevens drifts into discussions of religion—as if Nature inspired such thoughts (*L* 86-87, 91)—and both times reveals his dissatisfaction with, as he states in "Sunday Morning," "divinity if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams":[3] "It would be much *nicer*," Stevens writes on February 5, 1906, "to have things definite—both human and divine" (*L* 86-87). In April of the same year he presages a main argument of "Sunday Morning" when he writes, "The imagination is quite satisfied with definite objects, if they be lofty and beautiful enough" (*L* 91). Thus, a full eight years before the writing of "Sunday Morning," Stevens was, perhaps unconsciously, replacing the supernaturalism of Christianity with a religion of reality. Or at least so it seemed.

While all of this clearly suggests an atheistic proclivity in Stevens, other letters from the same period reveal a devotion to the church which conflicts with his claim of being "not in the least religious." Stevens was, for example, while entertaining doubts about religious belief, persuading his future wife, Elsie Moll, to join the church: "It has always been a particular desire of mine to have you join church; and I am very, very glad to know that you are now on the road" (*L* 96). Later in the same letter Stevens asserts that "the church is a mother . . . for us" (*L* 96). Elsie Moll eventually fulfilled Stevens' desire, and, in March of 1907, Stevens sent his praise in a letter:

> Was this the day you joined church—or is it next Sunday? I thought of it before going over for tea. You have kept so quiet about it. Well, if it was, I salute you no longer as a Pagan but as just what you ought to be. I read *Proverbs* in bed this morning and marked [a] verse in the thirtieth chapter . . . So I send that verse to you, as a good desire. (*L* 98)

Thus, apostate in one breath, proselytizer in another, Stevens vacillates between what he was brought up to believe and what he came to believe on his own.

In light of this evidence, "Sunday Morning" can be viewed as a manifestation of Stevens' own ambivalence towards religion, an exercise on paper of what he would later term in "Of Modern Poetry," "the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (*CP* 239). The poem unfolds as a dialogue between the poet, who, very much like the Stevens that avers "I am not in the least religious," rejects divinity "if it can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams," and the woman, who, very much like the Stevens that somehow still finds comforts in the church, laments in the poem that, despite the pleasures she finds in natural phenomena, she still feels " 'The need of some imperishable bliss.' " The colloquy that develops between poet and lady is not so much an argument as it is simply a dialogue, a mutual effort to find "What will suffice" to take the place of the ostensible permanence provided by the church's teachings.

In the *Letters* and journal entries, Stevens does not again reveal his uncertainties regarding religion until June 25, 1912, when he returned home to be with his mother during her last days:

> Fortunately for mother she has faith and she approaches her end here . . . with the just expectation of re-union afterwards; and if there be a God, . . . the justness of her expectation will not be denied. (*L* 172-73)

The presence of his dying mother, devout Christian that she was, not only rekindled in Stevens his own ambivalence towards religion—which we later see revealed through the persona of the woman in "Sunday Morning"—but also provided Stevens, at least in part, with the setting and themes of "Sunday Morning."

There are significant correlations between the setting of the beginning of the poem and the surroundings of Stevens' mother in her dying days. Stevens, in his journal, describes his mother's last days in her home, surrounded by "certain chairs," "rugs," "grape juice, orange juice, lemon and sugar" (*L* 173-74). He also records that one day "she saw what a bright morning it was and remarked on it. She said that she would like to have 'a room right in it' " (*L* 173). In a letter to his wife at this time, Stevens recalls an uncomfortable, recent "meditation on old age, death and the other barebones of the scheme of things," adding that all such thought could be "dissipated in easier surroundings" (*L* 174). The details that Stevens recounts here are strikingly similar to the surroundings of the woman in the opening stanza of "Sunday Morning":

> 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.

Although the atmosphere created by the details in these lines ("late / Coffee a oranges"; "green freedom of a cockatoo") is pleasant compared to what one m imagine the atmosphere in Stevens' mother's room was like (though she too v accompanied by rugs, chairs, orange juice, grape juice, and wished for a "sunı room), the point is that Stevens seems to have been influenced by the details s rounding his mother in her room and has used them to create an atmosph which would set up the central conflict in the poem between a paganistic humı ism and Christianity, a conflict in which Stevens himself, as his *Letters* sugge was involved.

Interestingly, Stevens creates "easier" surroundings in Stanza I of "Sunc Morning" both for him as narrator and the female persona, who feels "the dı / Encroachment of that old catastrophe" much as Stevens' mother must have l her impending death. This atmosphere in Stanza I, coupled with the woma absence from church on Sunday morning, yet her lingering need, expressed la in the poem, for Christianity's promise of permanence, sets up the poem's ce tral conflict between Christian teachings and paganistic propensities. It is a s ting in which Stevens can work through his religious ambivalence and propc a replacement for the consolations offered by Christianity: there is, in the poe the woman, holding on to her Christian beliefs, and there is the doubting po Only now the "uneasiness," I would suggest, has been removed for Stevens: t paganistic atmosphere is already suggestive of the poet's resolution of the cc flict, and the woman, not a "real" woman (unlike, that is, Stevens' mother), ca not be disappointed or shattered emotionally by what the poet will say.

With this autobiographical backdrop, several parts of "Sunday Morning" ta on an intensely personal, almost confessional, significance. It becomes very ha for us not to imagine, when at the beginning of Stanza II the poet cries out, "Wl should she give her bounty to the dead?" Stevens himself—the Stevens who "not in the least religious"—crying out simultaneously the same words concer ing his own mother. Conversely, it is very hard for us to forget the Stevens wl said "the church is a mother . . . for us," the Stevens who found such comfc there, when we hear the woman in Stanza V lament, " 'But in contentment I st feel / The need of some imperishable bliss.' " In this line could be the Stevens wh while sometimes satisfied with the physical as a replacement for the philosopl cal, still wonders whether "there be a God" and encourages his future wife join the church while claiming to be irreligious, or it could simply be the Steve who, with mind already made up, is voicing what he might imagine his moth would have said had he proposed his atheistic views to her during their last da together.

"Mother" and "the church" seem inextricably fused in Stevens, if one takes into account the biographical information that we now have. It is therefore more understandable that in "Sunday Morning" Stevens should, through the voice of the poet, mix "mother" imagery with his questioning of Christianity. In Stanza III, for example, one could say the poet implies that with a human "mother" come the "Large-mannered" solaces provided by Christianity's promise of an afterlife. Jove, not born from or suckled by a human mother, is free of such notions:

> 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 . . .

The "Large-mannered motions" in Jove's "mythy mind," one must assume, refers to the motions, or notions, of Christianity's insistence on the afterlife as the true "paradise." It does not seem coincidental, therefore, given our biographical data on Stevens and his mother, that the poet here links the human "mother" to the "Large-mannered" ideas of Christianity, since Stevens' mother was perhaps the primary source of his belief in Christianity. These notions are referred to pejoratively, for they are not what preoccupy Jove, who is referred to as "Magnificent" and who appears as a confident "king" would, moving "among his hinds."

"Confident" is not a word that could be used to describe the tone of the remainder of Stanza III, when the birth of Jesus, from, of course, a human mother, is alluded to:

> 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.

Though the poet predicts that a world lived around "our blood" "will be much friendlier," he expresses doubt and ambivalence toward the present in "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?" He acknowledges that, as things stand, the sky is "dividing," as Stevens himself, one must imagine, was divided concerning the promises of Christianity and, more importantly, the fate that awaited the woman in "Sunday Morning."

"Death is the mother of beauty," a central statement that first appears tw stanzas after the division expressed through Stanza III, emerges as a resolutic in which the poet reluctantly acquiesces to his own intuitions that there is no a terlife for the dead. But the poet has found a resolution in which there is sola for the living and, perhaps, the dying. "Death" and "mother" are, if we rememb Stevens' mother, again provocatively combined. But "beauty" is there as we In Stanza VI, the poet resolves his questioning, his misgivings, his hopes, h doubts, with a rationalization which allows the concept of earthly beauty—as lustrated in Stanza V, for example, with the piling of "new plums and pears / C disregarded plate," a plate long out of use—to replace the "dividing" concept an afterlife *and* to make up for the loss of an earthly mother:

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

The searching, questioning, ambivalent poet thus "devises" the concept "beauty," born out of "Death," in which both he and, significantly, "our earthl mothers waiting, sleeplessly," can find solace.

"Sunday Morning" reflects Stevens' religious ambivalence before his mother fatal illness and the necessity to come to terms with his feelings about Christianit afterward, a conflict precipitated by his visit to his dying mother. The poem, ther becomes not so much a simple renunciation of Christianity's tenets as a dialogu in which to find and explain—to the poet, to the woman in the poem, to Steven mother, dead at the writing of the poem—"What will suffice." The tone of th last two stanzas, after the poet has created "beauty" as the receptacle into whic "our earthly mothers" are placed, expresses the poem's newly found resolutior

> 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.
> . . . . . .
>
> 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 old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free . . .
> . . . . . .

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

The tone of both stanzas is no longer one of questioning. The poet, in Stanza VII, jubilantly affirms what "shall" be, now that the concept of earthly "beauty" has reconciled his ambivalence toward the supernatural contentment of Christianity. Stanza VIII, which sees this contentment denied the woman by "A voice," is understandably less jubilant in tone, since to affirm that "The tomb in Palestine / Is not the porch of spirits lingering" is to deny the possibility of an afterlife—a difficult resolution, especially in light of the woman's needs, for both the poet and Stevens himself. But both stanzas proceed with a calm assurance and resolve noticeably absent during the uneasiness of the preceding stanzas, as if a large burden has been lifted off the poet's shoulders.

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Notes

[1]Joy Pohl, " 'Sunday Morning': Stevens' Equivocal Lyric," in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 8 (Fall 1984), pp. 85-86.

[2]Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 173. Subsequent references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *L* followed by the page number.

[3]Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 67. Subsequent references to "Sunday Morning" will be from this source. References to other poems from this source will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *CP* and page number in the text.