



## Sunday Morning, by Wallace Stevens

### In A Nutshell

You know the story: a fresh-faced young writer has his or her first work published, the literary world takes notice of the next big talent, and the writer goes on to create some of the most famous and well-known works of his or her time. Now imagine that the "fresh-faced writer" is the middle-aged man who lives next to you and dutifully rides the train to his office job every morning wearing a shirt and a tie.

Meet Wallace Stevens in 1915, when "Sunday Morning," was published in *Poetry* one of America's premiere literary magazines. This was the work that made the literary world sit up and ask, "Who's the new guy?" Well, "the new guy" was an insurance executive and former lawyer in his late-thirties working as the vice president of the New York Office of the Equitable Surety Company. Not exactly the type you'd think would go on to become perhaps the most acclaimed American poet of the 20th century. In fact, it would be nearly another *decade* before he even published his first book of poems, *Harmonium*, in 1923.

"Sunday Morning" was published in two versions, and the version from *Harmonium* is the one that most people read today. With eight stanzas, it's the longer version. The one published in 1915 only has five stanzas. When he sent the poem to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, she said (essentially), "Wallace, this poem is fabulous! I love it! The only thing is that – see these three stanzas? – they don't work. We've got to cut them." And Stevens said (essentially), "You're the expert. OK."

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But, let's not be too hasty in judging poor Harriet. After all, she was one of the first bigwig types to recognize the genius of a man whom a lot of people probably would have thought too old to launch a career as a poet. The biggest change is that in the 1915 version, the eighth stanza with its immortal last words – "downward to darkness, on extended wings" – becomes the second stanza. It's still a great poem, just not as great as the version from *Harmonium*, so do make sure that you find the longer one.

*Harmonium* contained a bunch of classic poems like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Disillusionment of 10 O' Clock," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." After it was published, Stevens became truly famous, at least among literary folks. Still, he continued to live a double life from his humble home in sleepy Hartford, Connecticut: insurance man by day, modernist poet by night. And, it would take several more decades before his work was finally recognized with a big award, the Pulitzer Prize, in 1955. He died that same year.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Does the poem present a fair representation of Christian beliefs about heaven and the afterlife? How might a religious person respond to the poet?
- 2 Stevens describes the poem as "simply an expression of paganism" (Stevens, Holly. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. 1966: University of California Press. Pg. 290). Do you agree with him?

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- 3 The poem seems to suggest that the myths and religions of the world are products of the human imagination. What are the consequences of this view? Do you agree or disagree?

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