

The Peignoir, the Parrot, and the Death of Heaven: Manet's *Young Lady in 1866* and Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning"

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Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning" begins with one of the most memorable interiors in modern poetry. A woman has remained at home on the Christian Sabbath. She is still in her peignoir. There are oranges, sunlight, coffee, a rug, and the "green freedom" of a cockatoo. Against these intensely physical pleasures presses another world: Palestine, sacrifice, blood, the tomb of Christ, resurrection, and the promise of eternity. The poem develops from this apparently casual Sunday breakfast into one of modernism's great interrogations of religious belief. If the inherited Christian account of reality can no longer command assent, Stevens asks, where is the modern person to locate the sacred? His answer is at once exhilarating and disturbing: in the mortal world itself—in sensation, nature, desire, change, aesthetic experience, and ultimately mortality.

There is a remarkable visual precedent for Stevens's opening scene. Édouard Manet's *Young Lady in 1866*, painted in 1866 and exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1868, depicts Victorine Meurent standing in an intimate pink silk dressing gown. Beside her is a parrot. At her feet lies a half-peeled orange. Flowers and a monocle complete an ensemble that scholars have interpreted as an allegory of the senses: flowers suggest smell, the orange taste, the parrot hearing, and the monocle and Meurent's handling of it sight and touch. Manet has placed a modern woman, private sensuality, and ordinary physical objects into the monumental full-length format normally associated with formal portraiture.

The correspondence with Stevens is extraordinary. "Sunday Morning" opens with a woman in a peignoir, oranges, and an exotic bird. These are not incidental details scattered through the poem: Stevens gathers them within its first three lines and immediately makes them representatives of sensuous earthly existence. They "dissipate / The holy hush of ancient sacrifice." Later the fruit and "bright, green wings" become examples of earthly things that might themselves be cherished with something approaching the reverence traditionally reserved for heaven.

This relationship is not a new discovery. In 1978, William Bysshe Stein explicitly identified Manet's painting as a source for the opening of "Sunday Morning," describing Stevens's opening as an impression of the Manet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and observing that a "similar inspiration governs Stevens' deployment of details." Stein notes in particular Stevens's

appropriation of the peignoir and his transformation of Manet's parrot into a cockatoo. His argument establishes an important critical precedent for connecting the two works.

What has received less attention, however, is the extraordinary fitness of Manet's painting for the philosophical work Stevens undertakes in "Sunday Morning." The relationship is more consequential than the borrowing of a few striking objects. Manet and Stevens occupy analogous positions in the histories of modern painting and modern poetry. Both confront inherited hierarchies of value. Both retain forms and gestures inherited from tradition while transferring their authority to modern experience. And both raise, in different media, the question at the heart of secular modernity: when inherited sources of transcendent meaning lose their authority, where can meaning reside?

Manet's Modern Woman

By the time *Young Lady in 1866* appeared at the Salon of 1868, Manet was already notorious. Victorine Meurent carried particularly charged associations. She had modelled for the controversial female figures in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*. Here she is fully clothed and apparently demure, but Manet nevertheless unsettles established expectations of portraiture.

The peculiarity lies partly in scale and presentation. Manet employs the monumental full-length format normally associated with formal and even state portraiture, yet his model appears in intimate domestic clothing. The peignoir was not simply another fashionable dress: it belonged to the private sphere. Manet thus gives the scale and seriousness of public portraiture to a woman presented amid the objects and clothing of private, sensuous life.

Contemporary critics noticed the affront. One complained of Manet's "current vice" of failing to "value a head more than a slipper." The criticism goes considerably deeper than a complaint about technique. Academic painting inherited hierarchies of subject and genre: history painting stood above scenes of ordinary life; elevated historical, mythological, and religious subjects traditionally possessed a dignity unavailable to mundane objects. Manet's supposed vice was his refusal to observe such distinctions.

The charge is revealing because the same refusal becomes fundamental to "Sunday Morning." In the same vein, Stevens asks where meaning is to come from when one realm of existence outranks another; when spirit is outranked by body; when eternity is outranked by temporality; when Palestine no longer possesses a sanctity unavailable to an orange in sunlight.

The inherited hierarchy says that the visible world derives its ultimate significance from an invisible one. Manet paints as though the visible might possess significance in itself.

That proposition helps explain the startling modernity of *Young Lady in 1866*. The painting does not merely represent modern clothing or contemporary life. It alters the apparent source from which significance enters the work. Victorine is not a saint, goddess, queen, or allegorical heroine in any conventional sense. No biblical or classical narrative is required to legitimate her presence. She stands amid things: silk, flowers, fruit, bird, monocle, flesh.

The possible allegory of the five senses intensifies the point. Traditional religious art frequently makes the material world signify beyond itself. Manet's objects instead direct attention toward embodied perception. The orange is tasted; flowers are smelled; the parrot is heard; the monocle concerns sight; the fingers touch. Meaning gravitates toward sensation.

Stevens's Painted Interior

Now consider Stevens's opening: peignoir, coffee and oranges, followed immediately by the "green freedom" of a cockatoo.

The similarities to Manet are too concentrated to be dismissed as a generic resemblance between two sensualists. Peignoir, orange, exotic bird, woman, domestic interior constitute an unusually particular configuration. Stein's identification of the painting as an antecedent is therefore persuasive even though no known statement by Stevens has yet been produced in which he confirms that he consciously borrowed from Manet.

The historical circumstances make the relationship possible. The Metropolitan Museum acquired *Young Lady in 1866* in 1889, more than two decades before "Sunday Morning" appeared in *Poetry* in 1915. The painting was therefore publicly accessible in New York during Stevens's early adulthood. This establishes availability, though not proof that Stevens actually encountered the canvas before composing the poem.

Stevens's later career demonstrates beyond question a sustained intellectual interest in painting. In 1951 he delivered "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The lecture cannot be used as evidence that Stevens saw this particular Manet at the Metropolitan Museum decades earlier. It does, however, confirm that the relationship between visual and verbal art became an explicit subject of his thought.

More important is what Stevens does to Manet's scene. He transforms the painted interior into a philosophical experiment.

His woman should, according to Christian convention, be somewhere else. It is Sunday morning. Instead of participating in public worship, she remains in private clothes, taking breakfast amid fruit, warmth, and an exotic bird. The domestic interior has displaced sacred architecture.

The peignoir has displaced Sunday dress.

The orange has displaced sacramental associations.

The cockatoo's "green freedom" has displaced ecclesiastical restraint.

Sunlight has begun to compete with supernatural illumination.

Yet Stevens is too serious a poet simply to announce that oranges are preferable to Christianity. The sensual objects initially "dissipate" the atmosphere of sacrifice, but Christianity immediately returns as an imaginative pressure. The woman feels the dark encroachment of the Christian

story. Her oranges and bird become momentarily incorporated into a ghostly procession leading across the sea toward Palestine.

Modernity has not simply forgotten Christianity. It remains haunted by it.

From Sacred History to the Sacred Present

The central challenge arrives in the second canto: why should the woman surrender the bounty of the living world to the dead? Stevens asks whether divinity might be found in sunlight, fruit, wings, weather, forests, and the beauties of the earth rather than exclusively in an unseen supernatural order.

Here the Manet source becomes philosophically important. The orange and bird are not merely decorative borrowings. Stevens makes them representatives of an alternative metaphysics.

Christianity understands creation in relation to a transcendent Creator. Stevens experiments with a characteristically modern reversal. What if earthly things do not require another world to authenticate their value? What if their transience is not an imperfection to be overcome but part of what makes them precious?

“Divinity must live within herself.”

That declaration belongs near the centre of the poem’s secular modernism. Yet “within herself” does not mean mere subjective whim. Stevens immediately fills this interior divinity with external nature: rain, snow, forests, wet roads, summer and winter. Human consciousness and mutable nature encounter one another without requiring a supernatural guarantor of their significance.

Manet had performed an analogous operation pictorially. Academic convention inherited a vocabulary of elevated meanings from religion, mythology, aristocracy, and history. Manet retains the scale and seriousness of high art while replacing the traditionally elevated subject with a contemporary woman in a dressing gown.

Stevens does something comparable with sacred poetic discourse. “Sunday Morning” retains the grandeur of religious language, blank verse, theological argument, and visionary imagery while progressively relocating holiness from eternity to temporality.

Both works therefore break with tradition in a peculiarly modernist fashion: not by simply discarding its forms, but by retaining those forms while altering the sources from which they derive their authority.

Manet keeps the grand portrait but changes who and what deserves grandeur.

Stevens keeps the hymn to divinity but changes where divinity resides.

The Levelling of Hierarchies

The contemporary criticism of Manet clarifies the comparison. To complain that he failed to value a head more than a slipper was to accuse him of levelling a hierarchy of significance. Everything threatens to become paint: face, fabric, flower, fruit, bird.

Something remarkably similar occurs in Stevens. Christianity provides a hierarchy extending from earth toward heaven, body toward spirit, mortal toward eternal. "Sunday Morning" subjects those distinctions to relentless interrogation.

What if a bird's wing can provoke something approaching the wonder traditionally associated with an angel's?

What if an orange can become an object of reverent attention?

What if a woman's Sunday morning in a peignoir can bear the weight of poetic meditation formerly reserved for explicitly sacred subjects?

The disturbance produced by both works is therefore not simply stylistic. They reconsider where ultimate significance may be found.

That does not mean Stevens merely exchanges Christianity for hedonism. His famous proposition - "Death is the mother of beauty" - prevents so simple a reading.

Mortality is not merely an unfortunate defect in Stevens's earthly paradise. It becomes the condition that creates its intensity. Fruit ripens because it will fall. Seasons matter because they pass. Desire exists in relation to absence and loss. Beauty acquires urgency because beautiful things cannot be permanently retained.

Christian resurrection promises the overcoming of death. Stevens instead makes mortality itself a condition of beauty. This may constitute the poem's most radical departure from Christian eschatology.

Manet and Stevens as Modernists

Manet occupies a foundational position in the history of modern painting partly because he simultaneously engaged with the artistic past and disrupted its conventions. He studied the old masters intensely. His innovations did not arise from ignorance of tradition but from confrontation with it.

The same is true of Stevens.

"Sunday Morning" is saturated with inherited Western culture: Christianity, classical mythology, Romanticism, pastoral poetry, and philosophical argument. Its modernism consists not in cultural amnesia but in a struggle over inheritance.

The poem moves from Christ backward to Jove and forward toward an imagined earthly devotion. Gods appear within history. Jove once seemed magnificent; Christianity succeeded pagan religion; Stevens asks whether Christianity too may belong to a religious order whose inherited imagery remains powerful even when its metaphysical claims no longer command belief.

But what follows?

This is the question that distinguishes serious modernism from mere iconoclasm. Destroying inherited meaning is comparatively easy. Living after its destruction is difficult.

In the broader intellectual history of modernity, Nietzsche had formulated the problem in its starkest terms through the death of God. The weakening of a transcendent order does not automatically liberate humanity into happiness. It creates the more difficult problem of discovering or making meaning without the old metaphysical guarantees.

Stevens's poetry repeatedly inhabits that problem. His later idea of a "supreme fiction" develops an imaginative response to questions already visible in "Sunday Morning": whether poetry and imagination can perform some of the ordering work formerly performed by religious belief without falsely claiming the status of revealed truth.

Art, under these conditions, does not merely decorate secular existence. It becomes one of the means by which secular existence is rendered intelligible.

Here Manet becomes particularly suggestive as Stevens's predecessor.

If *Young Lady in 1866* lies behind the opening of "Sunday Morning," Stevens has taken imagery from a painting associated with the emergence of modern art and converted its pictorial revaluation into a theological and poetic one.

Manet asks, in effect: why must painting receive its dignity from traditionally elevated subjects?

Stevens asks: why must life receive its dignity from a traditional heaven?

The Paradise We Lose by Possessing

The woman in "Sunday Morning" nevertheless resists the argument. Earthly beauty does not entirely satisfy her because she still desires permanence - "some imperishable bliss."

Stevens's response is devastating. An unchanging paradise would threaten to become aesthetically meaningless. Does ripe fruit never fall there? Do boughs remain eternally heavy? Do rivers seek seas they never reach? Stevens imagines heaven by importing into it precisely the earthly things that derive their beauty from change, then exposes the contradiction involved in making them permanent.

The poem therefore makes temporality itself a source of value.

This is where Stevens moves beyond simple secularization. He does not merely declare supernatural religion false and physical pleasure true. He constructs an alternative account of beauty in which mutability performs some of the work once assigned to eternity.

The concluding vision is consequently neither church nor drawing room. The voice declares the tomb in Palestine to be the grave where Jesus lay rather than the threshold of lingering spirits. Jesus is placed within mortal history rather than presented as the guarantor of an eternal paradise. Human beings inhabit an “island solitude, unsponsored, free.” Deer move through mountains; quail whistle; berries ripen; pigeons descend through evening darkness.

The final pigeons become especially suggestive when the poem is read alongside Manet.

The visual sequence has begun with Manet’s parrot: exotic, domesticated, perched beside a woman amid cultivated luxury. Stevens transforms it into the cockatoo of the opening, paradoxically associated with “green freedom” despite its domestic setting. The poem ends with no exotic pet at all, but with ordinary pigeons moving in “casual flocks” through the open sky.

The movement is from possession toward freedom, interior toward exterior, exotic luxury toward ordinary nature, cultivated domesticity toward wilderness, and theological structure toward contingency.

Yet the ending is beautiful.

That is Stevens’s answer.

Modernism After the Altar

The Manet-Stevens relationship reveals something larger about modernism. Modernism is frequently described as a revolt against tradition. That is true but incomplete. Its deepest works remain haunted by the traditions they overthrow.

Manet required Velázquez, Titian, Goya, and the conventions of European painting in order to violate those conventions intelligently. Stevens required Christianity in order to imagine the post-Christian world.

“Sunday Morning” would possess little force if Christianity were merely ridiculous. Its power arises because the old faith remains imaginatively magnificent even as its metaphysical authority becomes uncertain within the poem. “Silent Palestine” continues to exert its gravitational pull.

The woman has stayed home from church, but church has followed her home.

That may be one of the defining spiritual conditions of early twentieth-century modernism.

Traditional transcendence has weakened; material existence has become newly vivid; art assumes an enlarged responsibility for meaning; yet the new dispensation cannot entirely silence the old.

This is precisely why Stevens's apparent use of Manet's *Young Lady in 1866* matters. Manet's Victorine already occupies such a threshold. She wears the clothing of private modern life but receives the monumental treatment of grand portraiture. Around her are not the conventional attributes of saint or sovereign but objects of perception: flower, fruit, bird, fabric, glass.

Stevens appears to animate that room.

His woman sits down. The orange becomes pungent. Manet's parrot becomes a cockatoo endowed with "green freedom." Sunlight enters. And because it happens to be Sunday morning, the apparently secular ensemble becomes the setting for a confrontation with two thousand years of Christian civilization.

The correspondence is particularly apt because Stevens's philosophical project parallels Manet's artistic one. Both ask what happens when inherited hierarchies lose their authority. Neither concludes that meaning therefore disappears. Instead, value migrates—from sacred history toward present experience, from transcendence toward perception, from eternity toward change.

Conclusion

There is no known statement by Wallace Stevens that conclusively establishes *Young Lady in 1866* as the conscious source of "Sunday Morning." That evidentiary limitation must remain clear. But the relationship between the works is considerably more than an accidental resemblance.

William Bysshe Stein identified the Manet connection explicitly in 1978, noting Stevens's deployment of the painting's distinctive details. The historical circumstances are compatible with the hypothesis: Manet's painting had belonged to the Metropolitan Museum since 1889, long before the poem appeared in 1915. Most importantly, the peculiar iconographic constellation is unmistakable: peignoir, woman, orange, exotic bird.

The more consequential question is therefore not simply whether Stevens borrowed from Manet, but why this particular Manet proved so suitable to "Sunday Morning."

The answer lies in the historical work performed by the two works of art.

Manet unsettled inherited pictorial hierarchy by giving intimate contemporary life the scale and dignity associated with elevated painting. Stevens unsettles inherited theological hierarchy by asking whether mortal earthly experience might deserve the devotion formerly directed toward heaven. Manet relocates artistic significance into the visible surfaces and sensations of modern existence; Stevens relocates divinity into mortal consciousness, nature, sensation, and imaginative experience.

Both remain deeply indebted to traditions whose authority they simultaneously undermine.

Seen this way, "Sunday Morning" can be read as a poetic transformation of Manet's modernist achievement.

The transformation is remarkably precise. The peignoir remains. The orange remains. The bird remains. But Stevens supplies the question latent in their arrangement:

What if these things are enough?

His answer remains deliberately unstable. Earthly existence cannot provide Christianity's promise of permanence because mortality is its governing condition. Yet that apparent deficiency becomes the source of earthly beauty. The modern person must cherish the world not despite the fact that it passes away but, in Stevens's formulation, because passing away gives beauty its urgency.

This is the wager at the centre of "Sunday Morning." Once heaven ceases to guarantee meaning, meaning must be discovered—or imaginatively made—among mortal things.

Manet had already placed those things before him: silk, a woman, an orange, a bird.

Stevens turned them into a Sunday morning after heaven.

Catholicism provides a particularly important counterpoint to Stevens because it contests the premise that modernity has actually rendered transcendence unavailable.

From a Catholic perspective, the difficulty with the Stevensian project is not principally that he takes beauty, nature, mortality, imagination, and art too seriously. Catholicism takes all of them seriously. The disagreement concerns where their significance comes from and where they lead. For Stevens, particularly in the secular trajectory of "Sunday Morning," the collapse or loss of confidence in transcendent religious belief places an enlarged burden upon the imagination: poetry and art become means by which human beings confer order and significance upon an otherwise "unsponsored" world. Catholicism reverses the direction of explanation. Beauty does not acquire spiritual significance because the imagination bestows it upon an indifferent universe; beauty is already meaningful because created reality participates in a good and intelligible order whose source transcends it.

That distinction is especially illuminating in relation to Stevens's oranges, birds, sunlight, weather, and mortality. Catholic doctrine does not require the believer to turn away from such things toward a purely immaterial heaven. Its sacramental imagination insists that material things can mediate realities beyond themselves. Bread, wine, water, oil, bodies, marriage, suffering, death, art, and nature are not competitors with transcendence. Creation can disclose the Creator. In the language of *Gaudium et Spes*, created things possess their own "stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order," but the creature ultimately cannot be understood without the Creator. Stevens's modernism can therefore be seen as preserving one half of a Catholic sacramental vision—the intense apprehension of the goodness and beauty of created things—while severing those things from their transcendent source.

This makes "Death is the mother of beauty" an especially sharp point of disagreement. Stevens makes mortality constitutive of beauty: the fruit matters because it falls; earthly things become precious because they disappear. Catholicism can accept much of the phenomenological insight

while rejecting its metaphysical conclusion. Finitude can intensify our experience of beauty, but death is not its ultimate source. In Catholic doctrine death is an evil associated with the fallen human condition, while beauty ultimately originates in God and therefore precedes death and survives it. Christianity does not abolish the significance of mortality; the Crucifixion places death at the very centre of its faith. But the Resurrection denies death the final word. Stevens's earthly paradise derives poignancy from the impossibility of permanence; Christianity proposes that the human longing for permanence is not necessarily an illusion.

There is consequently a revealing symmetry between Stevens's modernism and Catholic sacramentalism. Both resist a world stripped of significance. Both attribute extraordinary importance to material reality and aesthetic experience. Both understand that human beings hunger for something exceeding mere utility. But they locate the source of that "more" differently. Stevens increasingly looks to imagination and poetry; Catholicism locates it in a reality that imagination discovers but does not create.

This also complicates the claim that art can "fill the void" left by religion. Catholicism would question whether the void can actually be filled aesthetically. Art may awaken the desire for transcendence, embody it, clarify it, or even direct a person toward it; but art cannot itself supply what Catholicism claims is objectively present in God. Indeed, from a Catholic standpoint, the extraordinary beauty of "Sunday Morning" could be turned against its own secular argument: the persistent human desire to make mortal beauty signify something beyond itself might be evidence not that religion has been superseded by art, but that art remains haunted by the transcendence it cannot replace.

If a poet's major life choices can be read as disclosing his or her values in the same way their poetry can, then perhaps Stevens' deathbed conversion to Catholicism ought to inform one's reading of his works – and the implications for the future of poetry.

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