Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

SUMMARY

The speaker describes a man waking up to the sound of clothesline pulleys. The man's soul, startled awake, hovers above him, not quite back in his body yet. Outside his window, the sky seems to be full of angels.

The angels are dressed in bedsheets, blouses, and smocks: they're really there. They rise up as if they're all feeling a gentle, heavenly nostalgia together; their clothes swell with shared joy as the wind makes them breathe.

Now the angels seem to be flying, their speed suggesting their awe-inspiring power. They move like the rapids of a river. And now, they stop, falling still so suddenly that they don't seem to be angels at all.

The man's soul flinches as it realizes that the man will soon wake up; the everyday world will violate his dreams, just as it does every day. His soul shouts, "I wish that the only thing that existed was laundry: clean, warm hands in the steam, and spotless, heavenly dancing."

But, as the sun shines smilingly on the world's lumpy terrain and its bright colors, the man's soul begrudgingly embraces his body again. As the man wakes up, his soul says, in a new voice: "Bring those angels down from the red-lit clotheslines where they swing. Prepare fresh garments for criminals; let lovers go to their sad fates wearing sweet, fresh clothes; let the clumsiest of nuns seem to float in clean, dark robes, somehow keeping their balance."

THEMES

THE BEAUTY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

"Love Calls Us to the Things of this World" describes a man mesmerized by the laundry hanging outside his window in the morning light. To the drowsy man, this ordinary sight seems downright magical: the clothes on the clothesline transform into "angels" and seem to communicate directly with his "soul." For just a moment, then, mundane laundry becomes something transcendent, even spiritual. Through this scene, the poem suggests that the everyday world sometimes reveals fleeting flashes of intense beauty and meaning.

Half awake, the speaker looks out his window to see that "the morning air is all awash with angels." Though these angels soon turn out to be "bed-sheets," "blouses," and "smocks," he nevertheless insists that "truly there they are"—and, in a sense, he's not wrong. In seeing something angelic in this ordinary laundry, he's observing that there's something deeply moving and sacred about even the most ordinary things. Everyday life *is* beautiful and holy, the poem suggests, if one pauses to notice.

As the man begins to wake, he has to accept the fact that these laundry-angels are going to turn back into ordinary laundry and that he'll get sucked right back into boring, depressing routine. Yet his feelings remain intense, suggesting that even temporary glimpses of the world's spiritual beauty have a lasting impact. Though his "soul shrinks" from the dull reality he'll soon have to face, he's still moved by what he's seen, to the point that he wishes that all the world's people might be both symbolically "clothed" in the "clean linen" of such a vision and literally clothed in fresh, clean garments—the small pleasures of everyday life.

Even once the transcendent joy provoked by the laundry has passed, then, the man sees its ordinary qualities in a poetic light. Moments of sublime beauty are short-lived, the poem suggests, but they can translate into a lasting appreciation for daily life—and a deeper compassion for the other ordinary people around us.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34

THE IDEAL WORLD VS. THE REAL WORLD

In "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," a half-dreaming man catches a glimpse of another, better world when the laundry outside his window seems to transform into a crowd of "angels." He would love to stay in this dream world forever. However, he eventually accepts that he must wake up and face reality, in all its mundane beauty and pain. This struggle is universal, the poem implies: each morning, everyone must summon the strength to leave behind comforting dreams and face the imperfect world. Finding this strength requires a "bitter," complex kind of love for a complex world.

As the man wakes up, he slowly recalls that the world isn't as idyllic as it seemed in his dream state. The laundry outside his window, which he previously saw as a flock of angels, reverts to what it is in reality: simple clothing for imperfect, suffering humans (the world's "thieves," "lovers," and "nuns"). This realization jars the man, whose "soul shrinks' from the thought of waking and views the daily return of reality as a "punctual rape." Each morning, this line suggests, all of humanity must abandon their dreams of a perfect world and face the brutality of the real one.

Ultimately, it's a "bitter love" for everything the world has to

offer—both good and bad—that propels the man to wake up. Even when he can clearly see life's flaws, the man chooses to focus on its beauty, in a mundane but impressive feat of strength that everyone must perform each morning. This, then, is the meaning of the poem's title: it's "Love" that "Calls Us to the Things of This World," convincing the "soul" to "accept the waking body" and the struggles of real life. Perhaps some of that love, however, comes from the ability to *imagine* the ideal: the speaker's glimpse of those "angels" in the laundry might give him the grace to hope that everyone can keep "their difficult balance" in an imperfect world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-34

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

The eyes open ...
... awash with angels.

As “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World” begins, a man awakes to the creak of pulleys outside his window. Readers will soon discover that this sound comes from a clothesline that someone outside is loading with clean laundry. To the half-awake speaker, though, the pulley might as well be a divine trumpet: it heralds the arrival of a sky "all awash with angels." The laundry appears to him as a heavenly host.

This vision arrives in the suspended moment when the speaker isn't quite awake or quite asleep: a "false dawn," not a complete waking. It's the man's "astounded soul" who witnesses this sight, not the man himself; his soul is "bodiless" at first, suggesting his consciousness hasn't completed the journey back to his body from the land of dreams. Rather than using possessive pronouns, the speaker refers to "the eyes" and "the [...] soul," showing that the soul is separate from the man's body. This distinction suggests that man’s experience is a profound and strictly spiritual one, one concerned *only* with his "soul."

The soft sibilance of words like "spirited," "sleep," "soul," and "simple" evokes the hushed holiness of the speaker's angelic vision.

While the poem doesn't directly say that the angels the speaker witnesses are misinterpreted laundry, there's a clue in a pun: "The morning air is all awash with angels." The word paints a picture of a sky that seems to swim with winged messengers, but also hints that those messengers are the washing. This points readers to an idea that will be important later: these laundry-angels are *spotless*, clean as the speaker's disembodied soul.

Richard Wilbur will tell the story of this transcendent vision in flexible free verse, without rhyme or a regular meter. Notice the way that the dropped line in lines 4-5 ("As false dawn. / Outside the open window")—that is, what looks like one line divided in two—creates drama, introducing those laundry-angels with a little clean, quiet space of their own.

LINES 7-11

Some are ...
... their impersonal breathing;

As the second stanza begins, the speaker's description of the angels makes it clear that what he’s really talking about is laundry hanging from a clothesline. These "angels," eclectically dressed in "bed-sheets," "blouses," and "smocks," are drying linens that the speaker takes for something more.

Nevertheless, the speaker says, "truly there they are." These words suggest a paradox. The man sees something real, concrete, physical: the laundry. But he's truly seeing angels, too. To his half-awake "soul," these ordinary objects have taken on a divine beauty that's just as real as the fabric on the line.

In the poem's eighth line, the angels begin to move. The speaker describes their movement as an "impersonal breathing," "calm swells" of inhalation that speak of their shared "deep joy." Readers can again see a double truth here. Those "calm swells" are, on one level, just the truly "impersonal" movement of the laundry in the wind. But this movement has connected with something in the speaker's soul, a dream of universal "halcyon feeling." The word "halcyon," meaning "peaceful," "idyllic," and "nostalgically lovely," suggests that the man might see some flicker of heaven in the angels' joy, a vision of a paradise lost.

The utterly ordinary laundry, in other words, speaks to the half-asleep man of something transcendent. This everyday sight has turned magical—perhaps in part because the man isn't awake enough to *recognize* it as an everyday sight. In becoming unfamiliar, the laundry has also become meaningful and beautiful.

Listen to the echoing sounds in these lines:

> Now they are rising together in calm swells
> Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
> With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

The slant rhyme between "feeling" and "filling" and the sweet /ee/ assonance of "feeling," "deep," and "breathing" suggest the perfect harmony of the scene as the speaker gazes at the angels, suspended between sleep and waking.

LINES 12-16

Now they ...
... to be there.

The poem's tone darkens in the third stanza as the angels' movement becomes more hurried and frantic. In the waking

world, the wind picks up, whipping the laundry around so that it moves "like white water," a simile that suggests the clothes are churning as ominously as a rapid river. In the dream world, the angels are "flying in place" and "conveying / the terrible speed of their omnipresence," making a show of their dangerous power.

The speaker's heavenly vision, then, isn't just one of paradisiacal, sleepy peace, but of something awe-inspiring. If these angels are omnipresent, they're everywhere, all the time. Perhaps the vision he's having *isn't* confined to his dreams; perhaps he's seeing something that's always true, even if it isn't always visible in waking life.

All through these first stanzas, the speaker has seen something magical in the ordinary world. This passage suggests that he's seeing something real and something astonishing. However, his glimpse of magic can't last forever.

The wind falls, and the angels' movement stops as suddenly as it began. The laundry hangs "rapt," motionless, and quiet on the clothesline. Because of this new stillness, for the first time, the man has the sense that "nobody seems to be there." As soon as he finishes the thought, the vision of the laundry-angels starts to crack.

LINES 17-23

The soul shrinks ...
... sight of heaven."

As the laundry falls still and loses its angelic power, the speaker's "soul shrinks," flinching as it confronts "all that it is about to remember"—that is, all the boring realities of everyday life. Waking into the ordinary, angel-less world feels like a "punctual rape," a grim violation that happens every single morning.

There's a touch of irony in these words, though. That "punctual rape," the speaker says, happens "every blessèd day." On the one hand, "blessèd" (pronounced with two syllables, blessed) is a mild curse—rather like saying "every darned day." On the other hand, it suggests that there might truly be something sacred, blessed, about the ordinary world. Those angels appeared *in* the laundry, after all, not *instead* of the laundry.

Right now, however, the man's soul isn't prepared to find the beauty in everyday life. Instead, it makes a little speech:

> "Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
> Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
> And clear dances done in the sight of heaven."

These words remind readers of that laundry's symbolic weight. The man's soul isn't crying out for literal laundry here, but for a metaphorically spotless world, a world in which everything is clean, joyful, and sacred, "in the sight of heaven." The man's soul, in other words, longs to hang onto the "halcyon" spirit he glimpsed in those laundry-angels, a vision of a world unmarred by the burdens of everyday living. In this world, everyone's hands are as clean as their sheets: there's no guilt, no crime, and no urge for things to be better. Everything is already perfect.

LINES 24-27

Yet, as ...
... the waking body,

The man's soul has just cried out for a world in which there's "nothing on earth but laundry"—that is, a spotless life of transcendent visions, in which everyday reality doesn't weigh him down with its imperfections. That, of course, can't happen.

But perhaps reality isn't so bad as all that. As the sun begins to rise, it turns "a warm look" on "the world's hunks and colors"—that is, the world's lumpy terrain and bright colors, in contrast with the smooth and spotless whiteness of the laundry-angels. The world isn't perfect, these lines symbolically suggest, but it has its own kind of beauty. The personified sun embodies the sleeping man's own begrudging affection for the world he's about to wake into.

As the real dawn comes—not the "false dawn" of semiconsciousness—the man's soul "descends" into his "waking body," returning from the airy heights of his dreams to accept its earthbound life with "bitter love."

This line draws readers back to the poem's title, which alludes to the writings of St. Augustine. The self-denying saint wrote of his sorrow that his love of the physical world got in the way of his love for God, luring him away from spiritual matters. To this speaker, though, love for the "things of this world" is a little more complicated. The angels the man's soul saw in the laundry were, again, *in the laundry*; the difficulty is more that the soul can't always perceive the real spiritual beauty inherent in the physical world.

This might be read as a variation on what the Romantic poet William Wordsworth argued in his great Immortality Ode. In that poem, Wordsworth suggested that children can see that the world is divine, but that this capacity fades as we grow up and get used to our surroundings. This man seems to have a similar problem: the "punctual rape of every blessèd day" eats away at his ability to find transcendent beauty in ordinary things, an ability that his soul can only rediscover in his dreams. But, with "bitter love," he has to "accept" that this is the way of the world and find a *different* kind of loveliness in waking life.

LINES 27-34

saying now ...
... their difficult balance."

As the man's soul begrudgingly reunites with his "waking body," it finds a new courage to accept the world as it is. "In a changed voice," the soul makes a closing speech, decreeing that the

laundry should be taken down from the metaphorical "ruddy gallows" (or red-lit hangman's scaffold) where it hangs and used to clothe all the world's ordinary, suffering, imperfect people.

The image of the gallows suggests that the laundry-angels have been *executed;* their transcendent beauty can't survive the pressures of everyday life. But the "ruddy" light on this grim scene is also the light of a hopeful dawn. The angels' death makes room for a different kind of beauty, the man's soul insists, declaring (with ringing, biblical-sounding anaphora):

> Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
> Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,

These lines suggest that the soul wishes ordinary comforts on ordinary people: the world's sinning thieves and soon-to-be-heartbroken lovers all need care, clean clothes, compassion. Perhaps they also need visions of a better world. That clean laundry might provide a symbolic reminder that the vision of heaven the man's soul saw in the laundry is somehow real, too, even though one can only catch an occasional glimpse of it.

The soul concludes its speech by wishing that:

> [...] the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
> Of dark habits,
> keeping their difficult balance."

That "difficult balance" is the balance of living in this imperfect world and dreaming of something better—a balance that "nuns" in particular might know very well. The nuns' "dark habits" are their robes, but there's a pun here: "dark habits" might also suggest less-than-holy behavior. Even sisters with their eyes on heaven, this poem suggests, have to deal with the complicated reality of "this world," finding a way to love and care for everything that falls short of perfection (themselves included).

SYMBOLS

LAUNDRY

The poem's central symbol is the clean laundry hanging to dry outside the man's window. When the man sees the flapping sheets and blouses as a host of angels, they embody both the beauty of the everyday—they're just laundry, after all—and a kind of spiritual *cleanness,* a heavenly vision of a spotless world.

Eventually, the man is forced to wake, and the laundry is just laundry once more. However, even then, the man is able to appreciate the simple beauty of having something clean to wear. Even when life's simple pleasures aren't quite transcendent, the laundry symbolically suggests, they can still bring joy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 21-23
- Lines 29-34

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" depicts a man who, just on the border between sleep and waking, sees the laundry hanging outside his window as a flock of angels. The personification of the laundry suggests that there is beauty to be found in everyday objects and everyday life, even in a chore as mundane as hanging clothes out to dry.

When the laundry-angels first appear, they're a vision of "calm" and "deep joy," figures that speak of a better world. The fact that these angels appear in the form of clean clothes and spotless sheets might suggest that part of what's so angelic about them is their *cleanliness:* these immaculately happy beings reflect a world without mess or evil. Though the speaker feels that world is out of his reach after he wakes up, the fact that the angels appear in the ordinary laundry hints that the everyday world might be shot through with this immaculate beauty, even if it's not always obvious.

The speaker also personifies the sun at the end of the poem. As it rises, it "acknowledges with a warm look the world's hunks and colors": that is, it smiles down on the lumpy, brightly-colored landscape, not just the spotlessly white laundry. In these lines, the sun mirrors the man's sentiments as he begrudgingly accepts that, just as the sun must rise each morning, he must continue to embrace the imperfect everyday world.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Outside the open window / The morning air is all awash with angels."
- **Lines 7-16:** " Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses, / Some are in smocks: but truly there they are. / Now they are rising together in calm swells / Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear / With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing; / Now they are flying in place, conveying / The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving / And staying like white water; and now of a sudden / They swoon down into so rapt a quiet / That nobody seems to be there."
- **Lines 24-25:** "Yet, as the sun acknowledges / With a

warm look the world's hunks and colors,"

PUN

A pair of subtle puns hint that the world is a complex place that mingles heavenly beauty with everyday drudgery.

The first of those puns appears in line 6, where the speaker marvels that "the morning air is all awash with angels." On the most obvious level, that just means that the air is swimming with angelic figures. A moment later, though, readers will realize these angels are actually the *washing*—the laundry. This little joke invites readers to share the speaker's vision of a world in which the sight of sheets hung out to dry might offer a glimpse of the divine.

At the end of the poem, meanwhile, the speaker's soul declares that even the "heaviest nuns" should "walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits." The literal meaning here is that unwieldy, clumsy old nuns should be clothed in spotless robes, just as the "thieves" and "lovers" of the previous lines are. But those "dark habits" might also be the nuns' less nun-like behavior: dark, secret *habits* that they might not want to let anybody know about. Even holy women, this pun suggests, have to navigate the "difficult balance" between heavenly virtue and earthly imperfection.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "The morning air is all awash with angels."
- **Lines 32-33:** "the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits,"

ALLITERATION

Musical alliteration makes "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" sound poignantly beautiful as the speaker's vision.

Listen, for instance, to the sibilant alliteration in these first lines:

> And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
> Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple

All those quiet /s/ sounds evoke the stillness of the dawn and the quiet swish of the laundry on the line.

There's a subtler alliterative effect in the line "the morning air is all awash with angels." Every /a/ here makes a slightly different sound—there's an /eh/ sound, an /ah/ sound, an /uh/ sound, and an /ay/ sound. But there's still a family resemblance between these variations on /a/ words, creating a delicate melody.

And listen to the interplay of sounds in this passage:

> Now they are rising together in calm swells
> Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
> With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Alongside the paired /f/ sounds of "feeling" and "filling"—words so similar to each other that they form an internal slant rhyme—and the /w/ sounds of "whatever they wear," these lines use assonance, linking "feeling," "deep," and "breathing" with a long /ee/ sound. These rapturous lines start to sound like a song of joy.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "spirited," "sleep," "soul"
- **Line 3:** "simple"
- **Line 7:** "bed," "blouses"
- **Line 8:** "Some," "smocks"
- **Line 9:** "swells"
- **Line 10:** "feeling, filling," "whatever," "wear"
- **Line 13:** "speed"
- **Line 14:** "staying," "white," "water," "sudden"
- **Line 15:** "swoon"
- **Line 16:** "seems"
- **Line 17:** "soul," "shrinks"
- **Line 18:** "remember"
- **Line 19:** "rape"
- **Line 22:** "rosy," "rising"
- **Line 23:** "dances done"
- **Line 25:** "warm," "world's"
- **Line 30:** "Let," "linen"
- **Line 31:** "Let lovers"
- **Line 32:** "heaviest"
- **Line 33:** "dark," "habits"
- **Line 34:** "difficult"

IMAGERY

Imagery helps to evoke the speaker's shifting moods as he wavers between resentment and love for everything that life has to offer.

When the poem opens, the man's half-awake soul is awestruck by the beauty of the "angels" outside his window—angels that readers soon realize are laundry hung up to dry. Accordingly, the descriptions of the laundry feel ethereal and holy. The speaker lingers on the way the hanging clothes seem to breathe in "calm swells" or fall into a "rapt [...] quiet" as the wind stirs or drops. These otherworldly images emphasize the beauty that the speaker is able to find in these ordinary objects and evoke the breezy stillness of early morning, its quiet interrupted only by the squeaky "cry of pulleys."

As he starts to wake up, the man wishes he could keep this glimpse of perfection with him. He longs for a world of "rosy hands in the rising steam," an idealized image of someone doing laundry, their hands pink and squeaky clean. There is no mention of stains or dirt or sudsy water; instead, the man chooses to focus only on the good, imagining a world in which

everything and everyone is perpetually freshly washed.

Once the man has woken up in earnest, the mood of the poem darkens, and the imagery begins to include descriptions of both the ugly and the beautiful things of this world. The clothesline is described as a set of "ruddy gallows" (or a red-lit hangman's platform); the man imagines nuns walking in "dark habits," robes whose dark color might also reflect the nuns' darker, more secretive *behaviors*.

However, when the speaker imagines the sun beaming down on the waking world's complexities with a "warm look"—imagery that suggests both the sun's physical warmth and a sweet, affectionate gaze—he suggests that one must learn to find the beauty in a world that *isn't* totally spotless, blessing it with a "bitter love" for things as they are.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Outside the open window / The morning air is all awash with angels."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Now they are rising together in calm swells / Of halcyon feeling"
- **Lines 13-16:** "moving / And staying like white water; and now of a sudden / They swoon down into so rapt a quiet / That nobody seems to be there."
- **Lines 22-23:** "rosy hands in the rising steam / And clear dances done in the sight of heaven"
- **Lines 24-25:** "the sun acknowledges / With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,"
- **Line 29:** " "Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;"
- **Lines 31-33:** "Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone, / And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating / Of dark habits,"

VOCABULARY

Spirited (Line 2) - Whisked away, stolen away.

Awash (Line 6) - Swimming with, full of—with a subtle pun, since the "angels" here take the form of some washing!

Smocks (Line 8) - Loose blouses or dresses.

Halcyon (Lines 9-10) - Paradisiacal, calmly happy, idyllic.

Impersonal breathing (Line 11) - This line suggests that the laundry is swaying slightly in a breeze, making it appear as though the "angels" are breathing.

Omnipresence (Lines 12-13) - The godlike ability to be everywhere at once.

Rapt (Line 15) - Fascinated, hypnotized. You might be "rapt" as you stared at a beautiful painting, for instance.

Swoon (Line 15) - Faint, fall motionless.

Punctual (Line 19) - Timely, regular.

Hunks and colors (Lines 24-25) - Lumpy, earthy shapes and bright colors—as opposed to the clean flat whiteness of the angelic laundry.

Ruddy gallows (Line 29) - Reddish hangman's ropes—here used metaphorically to describe the clotheslines lit by the early sunlight.

Dark habits (Lines 32-33) - Nuns' uniforms.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" is written in five irregular stanzas of free verse, ranging from five to eleven lines long. Wilbur often shapes his stanzas with dropped lines—lines that seem to break off in the middle and pick up again on a new line, as in lines 4-5 ("As false dawn. / Outside the open window"). Take a look at the original text of the poem to understand how Wilbur formats these lines to make them look as if they're one piece split in two.

All those dropped lines make it feel as if the poem is built from broken or colliding cinquains (or five-line stanzas), a regular shape tweaked into something messier. That choice fits right in with the poem's themes. The speaker can't stay in his transcendent vision of spotless angels forever. Instead, he has to embrace the mess of the everyday world, learning to see the sacred in the mundane. The poem's broken form mirrors his acceptance of a broken world.

METER

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't stick to any regular meter. This is a fitting choice for a poem about accepting all the mess and imperfection of everyday life.

However, the poem does use an occasional flicker of iambic pentameter—that is, a line of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Listen to what happens in line 6 when the laundry-angels first appear, for instance:

The morn- | ing air | is all | awash | with angels.

This line could have come out of Shakespeare or Milton. (The extra unstressed syllable at the end doesn't change that—it's known as a feminine ending, and it's as traditional as the rest.) Fittingly, this elegant rhythm appears just as a heavenly vision does: a little glimpse of meter matches the speaker's glimpse of an immaculate, heavenly world.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" does not use rhyme. Wilbur's poetry often used rhyme, so his choice not to use a formal rhyme scheme here feels

especially significant. Perhaps orderly rhyme might have felt too neat and tidy to suit this poem's exploration of everyday life in all its imperfect beauty.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is an anonymous third-person narrator. While this speaker has no clear identity, readers might imagine that it's actually a voice for the "man" whose dreamy morning the poem follows. The speaker shares this man's perspective as he watches the laundry outside his window dancing like a flock of angels and regrets that he has to get up and go about his ordinary business.

Sometimes, the man's soul speaks for itself, taking on a different perspective from his "waking body." In turns lamenting the imperfection of the world and boldly resolving to embrace it, the man's soul expresses the paradoxical belief that the everyday world is both deeply disappointing and sacred.

SETTING

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" is set in the early morning. The poem's speaker narrates as a man half-wakes to see laundry being hung up to dry outside his window. In his dreamy, half-asleep state, the "bed-sheets," "blouses," and "smocks" appear to be angels; for a moment, the everyday sight of laundry on a line gives him a glimpse of heaven.

Toward the end of the poem, the sun rises fully and illuminates all of "the world's hunks and colors"—that is, its lumpy, ordinary brightness, unlike the spotless whiteness of the laundry. This change in the environment marks the speaker's return to the (often disappointing) everyday world, but also strengthens his resolve to find beauty in the ordinary.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" was first published in Richard Wilbur's 1957 collection *Things of This World*, which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Wilbur's poetry often focuses on everyday life, following in the footsteps of poets like Robert Frost and W. H. Auden. "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" is a prime example, examining an experience that's at once transcendent and mundane.

In addition to being a poet, Wilbur was a talented and well-known translator who worked on the plays and poetry of Molière, Voltaire, and Racine. These writers influenced Wilbur in turn; like Voltaire's, Wilbur's work is known for its wit and its belief in the power of the individual.

Later in life, Wilbur would be named Poet Laureate of the United States. Bestowing this honor, the Librarian of Congress described Wilbur as "a poet's poet, at home in the long tradition and traveled ways of the great poets of our language."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Richard Wilbur, born in New York City in 1921, lived through an era of European history marked by the rise of fascist governments, from Benito Mussolini's Italy to Francisco Franco's Spain to Adolf Hitler's Germany. A political philosophy defined by dictatorial power, political violence, the suppression of free speech, and intense nationalism, fascism would lead to the Holocaust and World War II. This global conflict ultimately killed 40 to 60 million people.

Wilbur himself served in World War II as a young man. He was deployed to Italy, where he witnessed firsthand the atrocities of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" was written a little more than 10 years after he returned from his time in the military; sadder and more ambivalent than much of Wilbur's earlier work, the poem suggests that Wilbur was deeply affected by what he saw during the war. "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" expresses both a wistful yearning for a better world and a sorrowful commitment to the one we've got.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Richard Wilbur read his poem out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjeLdTk7IPU)
- About the Poet — Read a short biography of Richard Wilbur. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/richard-wilbur)
- Wilbur's Legacy — Read Wilbur's 2017 obituary. (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/obituaries/richard-wilbur-poet-laureate-and-pulitzer-winner-dies-at-96.html)
- Wilbur in WWII — Listen to Richard Wilbur discuss how his service in the war influenced his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzSFm02iwWM)
- A Portrait of the Poet — Take a look at a portrait of Richard Wilbur in his study. (https://static01.nyt.com/images/2018/01/14/books/review/14Wiman/14Wiman-superJumbo.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp)

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