The Existential Elements in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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THE EXISTENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE POETRY
OF WALLACE STEVENS

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Patsy Ann Satterly
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THE EXISTENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE POETRY
OF WALLACE STEVENS

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The initial subject of existentialism and some aspect of literature for a thesis topic stemmed from a personal interest in philosophy. However, it was not until I took a course in modern poetry under Dr. William E. McMahon that I received the encouragement and challenge that I needed to pursue a topic such as this, and his suggestion as well as my interest in Wallace Stevens was the reason for my choice. My most sincere appreciation goes to him for his direction and leadership during the composition of my thesis.

In addition, I would like to express my thanks to Mrs. Joseph Rowlett and Miss Lillian Rogers, whose cooperation and kindness in typing made it possible for me to meet deadlines. A special thanks goes to Nancy Locke and Behrooz Fatemi for their encouragement and help.
Numerous full length studies, as well as many articles, have been written about Wallace Stevens and his poetry. Some scholars, such as Henry W. Wells, have attempted to explain Stevens as the philosopher's poet and as the poet of metaphysics; yet no one has attempted to study in any detail the existential elements in his writings. A few authors--Martin Dauwen Zabel, Sigurd Burkhardt, and Roy Harvey Pearce--have mentioned possibilities in that direction, but have not explored them. This thesis will endeavor to explain the main tenets of existentialism as it is expounded by Sarte and Camus, and then to relate the basic concepts to the ideas of Stevens as they are reflected in his poetry.

As my basic text, I am using The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, since the text is more readily available than the individual works themselves, and since Stevens supervised this collection, which would indicate an especially valid sampling of the most important poems of each period. In a letter to Alfred A. Knopf on April 27, 1954, Stevens wrote:

My idea of a volume of collected poems would be to include everything in Harmonium, everything in Ideas of Order, everything in The Man With The Blue Guitar except "Owl's Clover" of which there are about thirty pages, everything in Parts of a World except "Life on a Battleship" and "The Woman That Had More Babies

"Than That," everything in *Transport to Summer* and everything in *Auroras of Autumn*.  

My thesis will follow this path laid out by Stevens.

The attitude that most readers have toward Stevens is that his obscure word choice and subtlety of mind make him a difficult poet to read. Yet the challenge involved in an approach to the thought of Stevens as expressed in his poetry is worthwhile, for it is not only literature in the esthetic sense, but is also rich in philosophy. Stevens indeed deserves to be called a poet's philosopher. In his journal Stevens wrote:

> Art must fit with other things; it must be part of the system of the world. And if it finds a place in that system it will likewise find a ministry and relation that are its proper adjuncts.  

Obviously Stevens is interested in more than art for art's sake.

As Frank Doggett points out, for Stevens, poetry is "a celebration of the existence of individual experience." Of course, such a purpose has a strong existential flavor, and to it may be added other existential concerns of Stevens, such as atheism, the freedom of man shaping his own destiny, various aspects of the absurd with a comic-tragic flavor, hostility toward older views of metaphysics, and a view of death as the finality of existence.

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3 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

This study will deal with such existential elements in Stevens' poetry. The poetry will be treated in three main divisions: the early period of *Harmonium* (1923); the middle period of *The Man With The Blue Guitar* (1936), *Ideas of Order* (1937), and *Parts of a World* (1942); and the late period of *Transport to Summer* (1947) and *Auroras of Autumn* (1950). Two introductory chapters will precede the actual study of the poetry; one is a chapter on existentialism as it is expounded by Sartre and Camus, and the other is a description of the existential bias in Stevens' mind, in terms of the ideas of Sartre and Camus. A brief conclusion will summarize the discoveries made about Stevens as an existential poet.
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CHAPTER I

THE EXISTENTIALISM OF SARTRE AND CAMUS

Many attempts have been made to define existentialism; it has been defined as a philosophy, a religion, and even a mode of life. Yet all of these terms are vague, and the beliefs of existentialists differ in many aspects. As Kaufman in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre states:

Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets. . . . The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism.

Thus, existentialism does not have one common or essential characteristic accepted by all; yet a family resemblance—a type of philosophizing or analysis that attempts to determine human existence or the basic structure of human existence—is evident in these explorations of the subjective individual. Existentialism attempts to recover the dignity of man in his struggle against the "collective claims and forces which threaten to submerge or pulverize individuality and personality. . . ." Kurt Reinhardt remarks that

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"Man is thus, existentialism tells us, at the core of every philosophical quest. With him philosophy begins, and with him it ends." Existentialism as such is not a new idea; it dates back as far as the thirteenth century with St. Thomas Aquinas and had been associated with such eminent writers as Kierkegaard (sometimes called the "Father of Existentialism"), Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre, and Camus.

Jean-Paul Sartre is the only one of these figures who has declared himself an existentialist. As Arland Ussher points out, "Jean-Paul Sartre is probably the greatest intellectual energy in the world today—even if that is rather a criticism of the present world." Although Sartre's philosophy perhaps fails to develop a sufficiently healthy approach to existence and being, his contribution to the movement of existentialism has been in seeking to recover human dignity, and his key ideas help to establish a center in existential thought through which Stevens may be approached.

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3Ibid., p. 17.


In Sartrian atheistic existentialism, man first exists and then realizes his essence. Therefore, the main premise for Sartre is that "existence precedes essence"; thus "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." Since there is no God to create a fixed conception of human nature, Sartre denies such a nature, positing merely "a universality of condition" in relation to the physical, to the structure of society, and to the laws of nature. As William Barrett points out, Sartre the Cartesian allots the same freedom to man that Descartes allots to God—absolute freedom. Thus, for Sartre, existentialism does not lead to despair; rather existential freedom may generate optimism in that it leads men to choice and action and recognizes the dignity of man. This freedom becomes a system of ethics which "may be summarized as the obligatory pursuits of chosen ends, accompanied by a constant awareness that they are freely chosen and that a new choice is possible. It requires both action and uncertainty, activity and reflection, modes of life which have often been held to be incompatible." Such a metaphysical context encourages a fresh, hard look at reality structures, plus a profound sense of

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7Ibid., p. 291.

8Ibid., pp. 303-304.

9Barrett, Irrational Man, pp. 242-244.

Godlike freedom in establishing values and viewpoints; Stevens, of course, is notorious for encouraging both attitudes, as well as the practice of flexible reflection.

According to Sartre, man's ontological need is to be God. Since the human being is responsible for what he is, he must choose for himself; yet to do this is to choose for all, with the responsibility of trying to choose the best. There are three elemental terms for Sartre in the description of the human situation. One is "anguish" ("I am full of anguish... I cannot guess what is expected of me. Yet it is necessary to choose..."), an emotion in which one experiences a sense of complete and profound responsibility, and in which one cannot prove he is the one to choose for others, yet he is compelled to act. Another term is "abandonment," a state in which one denounces God and eternal universal values ("I am condemned to be free"). The third term is "despair," an emotional awareness in which one recognizes that he cannot depend on others because each man creates his own nature and values—the only certainty is one's own will. Sartre illustrates the terms "anguish" and "abandonment" in the episode of a young man torn between the choice of going to fight for his country and the choice of staying with his mother. His desire was to go and fight;

13 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 439.
yet his mother would despair. To whom does the boy owe his loyalty—his mother or his country?  

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre expresses his famous concept of "être En-Soi" and "être Pour-Soi." "Being-in-itself" is the other than human existence—non-consciousness; "being-for-itself" is the extension of self beyond mere being. Marcel states that "being-in-itself," for Sartre, "has no inwardness and, consequently, no potentiality and no future. It can never be in the relation of 'other' to another being; indeed, it can have no relationship with another. It is itself, indefinitely and without any possibility of being anything else." For Sartre, a characteristic of the "being-for-itself" is bad faith, mauvaise foi, in which one consciously deceives himself. An example is the situation in which Sartre considers the cafe waiter. By his overt movement and mannerisms in waiting on and serving the guests, the waiter acts at his job.  

In the relationship of self with others, Sartre says: "While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine, while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me." The other is a threat to self since self is a center, and in the awareness of others, one  

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17 Ibid., p. 364.
encounters an alien freedom. For example, if one were looking through a keyhole and heard footsteps or someone coming, he would be limited or affected by the other person and would change his mode of behavior. Thus for Sartre, "Hell is--other people" because of the limitation of freedom. Such dreadful aspects of existentialism, of course, are not those that attract Stevens.

The world, Sartre claims, is absurd; it is absurd that man is born, that he lives, and that most of all he dies at an unknown moment ("Everything existing is born without reason, prolongs itself by weaknesses, and dies by chance."). In La Nausée, Sartre says: "When one lives nothing happens. Scenes change, men come and go, that is all. There are never any beginnings. The days come and go without rhyme or reason, it is an intermittent and monotonous process."

Living in this condition, one might contemplate suicide, but Sartre believes that this is bad faith because in committing suicide, one ends his freedom. An illustration of the absurdity of life is in "The Wall" by Sartre.

18 Ibid., p. 259.
20 For an informative critique of Sartre's concept of freedom, see Marcel, The Philosophy of Existentialism, pp. 47-90, in which Marcel comments on the most important tenets of Sartre's concept and points out that Sartre in a sense debases the dignity of man by making freedom too cheap and too easy.
21 My translation of Sartre, La Nausée, p. 169.
22 My translation, p. 57.
23 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, pp. 533-553.
In this short story three men are sentenced to death, and each is equal in this situation. By choice Pablo gives the officers false information which ironically proves to be true. His life is spared but he has died inside. Pablo is condemned to freedom by his choice. Stevens is extremely interested in the absurd aspect of existence also, but he takes a lighter comic direction, seeing more delight in the absurdities and ironies of the human situation.

Sartre is not alone in his existential philosophy; his contemporary Camus, although he claims that he is not an existentialist, also exhibits existential qualities. He may not be an existentialist in the sense that Sartre is, but his concern with the human condition places him within "the existential current of thought." For example, his interest in the individual, his idea of the absurd, his attitude toward suicide, and his concept of choice and freedom correspond closely to the ideas of Sartre, and he is valuable in seeking general existential premises.

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25 Albert Camus, "Three Interviews," in Lyrical and Critical Essays, ed. by Philip Thody and trans. by Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 345. Here he states: "No I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked together. We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts they might respectively incur. It is a joke actually. . . ." For more insight into Camus, the man, see Jean-Claude Brisville, Camus (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); and Albert Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, trans. by Philip Thody (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), an introspective diary concerning his literary outlines and sketches.

The first existential concern in Camus is the individual and his situation in the world. Like Sartre, Camus is an atheist, denying the existence of God and placing full responsibility on man. For instance, Meursault in The Stranger rejects and pities the priest for his dependence on God. Camus states, "... man is his own end. And he is his only end. If he aims to be something, it is in this life." These exact views are deeply fixed in the poems of Stevens.

As Henri Peyre points out:

The works of Camus . . . utter a pagan message which is to be set beside that of the great pagans of antiquity and that of some of the modern pagans to whom Christianity owes an immense debt of gratitude—for they have asked the right questions and constrained Christians to evolve ever more satisfactory answers to them.

Such is the case with Wallace Stevens, who is also a neo-pagan challenge to Christian orthodoxy.

Just as Sartre maintains an optimistic outlook in existentialism, likewise Camus locates a hope in the discovery and the acceptance of the world as absurd. According to H. Gaston Hall, it is not only the entire human situation that Camus considers absurd, but it is also the designation of "certain feelings connected with perception of the discreteness of things, to name a situation in which these feelings must be preserved, and to designate a

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revolt (the absurd wager) in which absurd feelings thus preserved became a weapon against the tragic paradox of man's fate."  

Thus, as Hall sees it, for Camus,

... the absurd depends as much upon man as upon that quality of the world. More precisely it depends upon the contradiction between man's will and the world. It is the sense of irremediable banishment to alien, sometimes hostile surroundings. It is limitless desire destined to limited satisfaction, hunger for life condemned, without appeal, to die. It is reason which, faithful to itself, rejects God as wishful thinking but lacking God to judge or to reward, faces a flat quality of existence without values and without hope.  

And for Camus, as for Stevens, "artistic creation becomes the highest value, not for the false reason that the work lasts, but because it intensifies and preserves consciousness. ..." Camus believes that

the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter--these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable.

Thus, Camus adds, Sisyphus becomes superior to his fate of endlessly rolling the stone when he becomes conscious of it.

In a personal interview Camus was asked: "Is there a theme in your work that you think is important and that you consider has been neglected by your commentators?" To which his reply was

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31 Ibid., p. 27.

32 Ibid., p. 32.

33 Camus, Myth, p. 28.

34 Ibid., pp. 119-123.
"Humor." Camus, as well as Stevens, possesses a great range of the perception of the comic in relation to the absurd, which scales from the "slight flicker of ridicule to the bitterly satirical." For instance, "in *L'Etranger*, the human comedy is presented in its most striking aspect: ethical judgment in social and religious costume (Cocktail dress by Justice, nightgown by God)." During Meursault's murder trial, the judge who presides is pictured as the absurd man who falsifies his role in society by proclaiming justice, as is also the priest, who pitifully deceives himself by believing in God. Thus, when Meursault refuses to wear the mask of society and play the role of the penitent, he becomes ostracized by humanity.

Suicide, which ends freedom and annihilates being, is definitely not approved by Camus. He states: "After death the chips are down. I am not even free, either, to perpetuate myself, but a slave, and, above all, a slave without hope. . . . What freedom can exist in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?" Suicide cannot be the answer since it negates being, freedom, and hope. Sartre, interestingly, claims that there is a passion of the absurd. The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He...

stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the "divine irresponsibility of the condemned man." 39

For Sartre, self-conscious self-living in good faith is the answer to being, but for Camus it is revolt against the absurd. In not conforming to society, Meursault, the stranger, is condemned: "He refuses to lie. . . . He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened." 40 Thus, Meursault remains in good faith by choosing to confront his sentence and by choosing to create his own values. This same kind of difficult integrity, of honest feeling and good faith, is often implied in the poems of Stevens.

These brief remarks on some of the key ideas in Existentialism will suffice to show in a general way the possibilities for existential attitudes in Stevens. He does not respond to the bleak and terrible dimension that has attracted Sartre and Camus, but he does respond to these general features of existential logic: that man's essence is not pre-determined but must be formulated in humanistic terms, and all theories about essence must be carefully checked against the more primary physical data of existence; that man is absolutely free to choose and act in the making and unmaking of value systems, and indeed is obligated to assume such a Godlike role; that God is not a positive factor in human experience and may not be invoked as such; that the ironies and oddities of human fate cause the idea of comic absurdity to


loom large in any theory of man; and that freedom to choose, act, and create establishes a healthy optimism at the center of any proper philosophy.
CHAPTER II

THE EXISTENTIAL BIAS IN THE MIND OF WALLACE STEVENS

As Frank Doggett points out, for Stevens, poetry is "a celebration of the existence of individual experience." Within such a general intent, Stevens develops specific existential ideas on imagination and reality, on atheism and death, and on the absurd and comic, all reflecting the existential bias in his mind. As an indication of the existential flavor in Stevens' poetry, the following poem ("Of Modern Poetry") is one of the many which place Stevens in the existential camp:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicat est ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two Emotions becoming one. The actor is

1 Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought, p. 168.
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that
gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.²

This poem expresses some of Stevens' ideas about poetry,
about reality, and most of all about imagination and the role it
plays in relation to reality and poetry. Moreover Stevens
describes the mind in existential terms—the freedom of man shaping
his own essence through the faculty of the imagination.

In approaching Stevens' position on reality and imagination,
some views of Sartre are helpful. Although Sartre discusses the
role of the imagination in psychological terms, some of his ideas
 correspond closely to those of Stevens. For Sartre's idea of "the
consciousness of imitation," he sets up two principles: one is
that a reaction accompanies perception, and the other is that the
mind perceives an object in a particular way and gives that object
some quality.³ This allows the mind constitutive power over the
"given" order of reality, but does not negate the "given" structures;
Stevens takes a similar view. Sartre further points out that "the
consciousness of imitation is a temporal form, that is, it develops
its structures in time," and "the imagined synthesis is accompanied

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, The Psychology of Imagination (New York:
⁴ Ibid., p. 35.
by a fully spontaneous consciousness and, we might even say, one that is fully free." Thus, each man's free perception of an object and its relationship to the act of consciousness would be different from another's, and each man inevitably shapes his world even in the act of perception. Since emotional shadings create much of what is added to reality by human perception, Sartre, much like Stevens, considers emotion to be "a mode of existence of consciousness," and "a transformation of the world."

In speculating on imagination, Stevens calls it "the power of the mind over the possibilities of things," and "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos." Furthermore, Stevens points out that "... the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real." He adds that there is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.

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5 Ibid., p. 40.
7 Ibid., p. 58.
9 Ibid., p. 153. This, of course, is close to Coleridge's theory of the imagination as reconciler of opposites.
10 Ibid., p. 6.
11 Ibid., p. 31.
Stevens, then, sees the "given" elements as a primary field which is later shaped and structured by man into systems of meaning and value, and what these are to be is an open question. This is in full accord with the existential premise that "existence precedes essence."

Thus, for Stevens, as William Van O'Connor points out, we perceive the world through the imagination, and to deny the shaping, imaginative freedom of the mind is to deny a genuine part of the actual. As Doggett points out, Stevens' sense of time assumes a continuous process or a consciousness in which "substances, physical objects . . . are subject to the transformations of the flow of consciousness and are known in all its changing lights, movement of values, attitudes, preconceptions, purposes." Furthermore, Marie Borroff says that the act of the mind that occurs in such a flow of time becomes primary for Stevens' mode of life, and the mind can only achieve satisfaction through an affirmation that the felt perceptions are true. In reference to Stevens' poetic theory, Robert Pack discusses two key terms: "resemblance," the relationship that

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exists between objects in the world, and "correspondences," the relationship of the mind to reality. Moreover, as Doggett sees it, Stevens recognizes that reality cannot be fully known, since the truth is beyond the realm of the imagination. Yet, for Stevens, "we live in the mind," and it is not demoralizing to mankind to admit that absolute reality, as Kant argued, is beyond the limits of our experience.

To Stevens, there is a difference between the poet and the philosopher, one which further illuminates his metaphysics:

The philosopher proves that the philosopher exists. The poet merely enjoys existence. The philosopher thinks of the world as an enormous pastiche or, as he puts it, the world is as the percipient. Thus, Kant says that the objects of perception are conditioned by the nature of the mind as to their form. But the poet says that, whatever it may be, La vie est plus cue les idees. Furthermore, Stevens points out that "if the end of the philosopher is despair, the end of the poet is fulfillment, since the poet finds a sanction for life in poetry that satisfies the imagination. Thus, poetry, which we have been thinking of as at least the equal of philosophy, may be its superior." This is a very important indication that Stevens sees his role as a poetic optimist, and his special existential location comes just beyond those existential theories that might generate despair.

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16 Stevens, The Necessary Angel, p. 140.
17 Ibid., p. 56.
18 Ibid., p. 43.
Although much of Stevens' verse is poetry on the subject of poetry, his strong metaphysical bias has been often noted. Henry W. Wells points out that Stevens' "mind is haunted"\(^{19}\) by the metaphysical, and Joseph E. Duncan states that Stevens' "has long been recognized as a 'metaphysical' poet in the philosophical sense of the word."\(^{20}\) As Morton Dauwen Zabel claims, "the imagination became for Stevens a source and principle of value, and something more: a mode of metaphysics."\(^{21}\) In addition, Daniel Fuchs states: "Like the existentialists, Stevens wants to bring man back to the irreducible facts of his existence. Like them, he refuses to adorn the old souvenirs. His disparagement of moralism, his deflationary style, Sartre would admire."\(^{22}\) For Stevens, as Fuchs sees it, man creates his own fiction whatever it may be, and "it is not the idea of a supreme fiction that Stevens rejects, but the old fictions which are no longer supreme."\(^{23}\) Another element of the existential in Stevens, as Sigurd Burkhardt and Roy Harvey Pearce point out, is his "stripping of language to the bare bones of statement . . . (which) is analogous to the existentialist's stripping man of all


\(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 64.
Thus, Stevens is clearly an existential poet with the marked metaphysical passion that characterizes most existential writing.

Before a complete understanding of the existential ideas in Stevens can be achieved, one must view his position on atheism and death. For, like Sartre and Camus, Stevens denies the existence of God and places the responsibility in man, himself; thus death is a finality. As Norman N. Greene points out, Sartre "does not hesitate to assert his atheism"; however, Greene feels that "Sartre does not so much deny the existence of God as assert that philosophy can have no knowledge of His existence." Thus, for Sartre, as with Stevens, the agnostic may be a better label; neither is much concerned with arguments about the existence or non-existence of God, but they assume that God has no part in the affairs of mankind—man, unsponsored, is alone. And, of course, for Sartre as well as Stevens, the freedom of man lies in the shaping mind and the creative imagination. Confirming this view of the humanistic and agnostic aspect in Stevens, Henry W. Wells states: "To Stevens, the ultimate God must be single and the conception of a single man..." Also, Robert Pack claims that for Stevens: "Man is free... because he is acting out his own will and not the will of a deity

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25 Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Ethic, p. 61.

26 Ibid., p. 79.

27 Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 79.
greater than himself." 28 Joseph N. Riddel presents the problem as a paradox: "Stevens is a religious man; he is also in the strictest sense an atheist." 29

Since death ends freedom for Sartre and Camus as well as for Stevens, it is one aspect of the absurd. However, Northrop Frye points out that Stevens' concern with death is in terms of the "extra dimension" 30 it gives to life, and in this respect it causes man to take more pleasure in the earthy paradise. Thus, as Riddel points out,

death becomes a metaphysical as well as a psychological mother of beauty, displayed in the harmonious coming and going of all organic things. It is thereby absorbed into the continuity of existence, and does not stand outside as a horrifying terminal. 31

Though death is just as absurd for Stevens as Sartre, Stevens, in view of his dedication to an optimistic existentialism, does see death in terms of dread.

Stevens reveals a final existential aspect in his frequent use of forms of the absurd, illustrated by his varied masks and poses. For Stevens, as for Camus, the man who wears the mask in society is the absurd man, but Stevens has a more jovial view of the function of the absurd. As Fuchs sees it, Stevens' masks

28 Pack, Wallace Stevens, p. 32.

29 Joseph N. Riddel, "Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought,'" MLA, LXXVIII (September, 1962), 487. Since Stevens' attitude toward God is open to question as the views of the above scholars indicate, a definite stand has not been taken in this paper to label Stevens exclusively agnostic or atheistic, but the possibility of both directions of belief is presented.


include the following categories: "American Pan and weeping
burgher, metaphysician and rationalist, rabbi and comedian,
immaculate dandy and man on the dump, Fat Jocundus and the skinny
sailor, the powerhouse and the man whose pharynx was bad."\textsuperscript{32}

Although Stevens possesses the spirit of the ludricous, Wells makes
the point that in the final consideration, Stevens is "more an
ironist than a comedian"\textsuperscript{33}; but irony almost always is comic, as
Wells might have observed. Moreover Wells states:

> The comic spirit is the spirit of liberation. Passing
> through its own domain, a smiling and fruitful lowland,
> it may enter into the superb scenery of both philosophical
> and emotional tragedy. It would be a great error to
> suppose Stevens the humorous poet another being from
> Stevens the tragic and highly serious poet; for a deeper
> scrutiny reveals them as one.\textsuperscript{34}

It is certainly true that Stevens shows both the comic and tragic
tone, like most existentialists. It is inevitable that a thinker
who sees how much man could make of life would also reflect the
sadness of the realization of how little he usually does make.

The mind of Stevens, then, reflects existential logic in a
variety of important directions: in his views on imagination and
reality, on atheism and death, and on the absurd and comic. For
Stevens, through the imagination, man perceives reality and weaves
it into his imagined world, altering it yet honoring its pure and

\textsuperscript{32} Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{33} Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens, p. 97. Also see
Pack, Wallace Stevens, pp. 13-18, concerning the comic aspect in
Stevens. A corroborating view is Frank Lentricchia, Jr., "Wallace
Stevens: The Ironic Eye," Yale Review XLVI (March, 1967), 336-353,
in which he discusses irony in selected poems of Stevens.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 107.
authentic mode. While he enjoys very striking connections with
Sartre and Camus, his conception of poetry as a joy and satisfaction
throws a different light on his existentialism, giving it a more
exuberant and positive note.
CHAPTER III

THE EXISTENTIAL IDEAS IN THE POETRY OF STEVENS

Since existential ideas are conspicuous in Stevens, their
issue in his poetry may be examined profitably by considering
representative poems from all periods in his work—early, middle,
and late. An intensive study of one long poem and twelve shorter
ones from these three periods should suffice to indicate the
chronological development of Stevens' existential themes.

In the first period, represented by Harmonium (1923), the
long poem "The Comedian as the Letter C," in simplest terms, is a
sort of travel take of the stages that Stevens has gone through in
his development as a poet. It is quite long, divided into six
sections, and since it is also a very difficult poem, it causes
critics much anxiety in their interpretations. Roy Harvey Pearce
states that the poem is about "a man trying to understand his
involvement in the war between reality and imagination," 1 and
Fuchs believes that Crispin "is the comedian, the mock-learned
projection of Stevens' poetic impulse." 2 The existential direction
that the poem takes is in terms of the subjective imagination and
the role it plays in relation to reality, and in terms of the

1 Roy Harvey Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the
Imagination in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays,
ed. by Marie Borroff, p. 117.

2 Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 32.
absurdity of man in the comic guise. The first section, entitled "The World Without Imagination," opens with a major existential premise: "... man is the intelligence of his soil, /The sovereign ghost." By "sovereign ghost" Stevens implies that man, as in existential theory, is the highest principle on the scene, that he is not sponsored by a higher power, that his roots are down in existing structures, not upward towards any hypothetical transcendent region. Although the sub-title indicates that Crispin lacks imagination, Francis Murphy points out that Crispin "has imagination enough to write 'poems of plums'--but that his imagination is not 'adequate' in the face of the overwhelming force of nature." Therefore, Crispin, who has a limited and strictly cultivated imagination, suddenly finds himself "at sea," where his imagination takes on an unchained freedom as it reigns in the perception of reality. For Stevens, as well as for Sartre and Camus, the absurd man often fails to recognize his freedom and becomes unauthentic. Scattered throughout the poem are obvious existential passages, such as "What counted was mythology of self,/Blotted out beyond unblotching" (I, 5-6). The "mythology of self," of course, indicates the subjective center of value, which is the keystone to all existential thought. "Blotted out beyond unblotching" is more subtle in its meaning. What Stevens implies is that man, as master of his destiny, must blotch and bungle the shaping of himself (and often appear absurd), and that no powers above him will "unblotch"
his fate. Stevens pictures the absurd man in the following passage in a comic yet tragic aspect:

... Crispin,
The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,
The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak
Of China, cap of Spain, imperative haw
Of hum, inquisitorial botanist,
And general lexicographer of mute
And maidenly greenhorns, now beheld himself,
A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass. (I, 21-28)

Of course, the comic ironic tone is evident as Crispin (here the absurd man) is named the "lutanist of fleas" and the "lexicographer of mute and maidenly greenhorns." Yet Crispin's tragedy lies in the existential idea of the inauthentic man. In his refusal to give the imagination free reign, Crispin has adopted the mask of society and is existing in "bad faith," a key existential term for both Sartre and Camus. As most critics claim, the color symbolism used by Stevens is important to the understanding of his poetry. As well as the use of oranges, reds, and purples to symbolize new fictions, Stevens employs blue as a symbol of the imagination and green as a symbol of reality. At sea, Crispin is "... dissolved in shifting diaphanes/Of blue and green..."--the imagination and reality. And it is here that Crispin declares his freedom by removing the mask of society. The following passage is also representative of the existential idea of man needing to be stripped of improper attributes:

The dead brine melted in him like a dew
Of winter, until nothing of himself
Remained, except some starker, barer self
In a starker, barer world, in which the sun
Was not the sun because it never shone
With bland complaisance on pale parasols,
Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets.
Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried
Celestial sneering boisterously. Crispin
Became an introspective voyager.

Here was no help before reality.
Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.
The imagination, here, could not evade,
In poems of plums, the strict austerity
Of one vast, subjugating, final tone. (I, 59-68, 79-83)

Existentialists have stressed that man must strip away romantic
illusions and learn to live in the bleaker, darker, more barren
world of what is authentic. These older, pale, sweet, sentimental
illusions are implied by the "bland complaisance on pale parasols"
and the "chaste bouquets," which are not possible any more.
Obviously, the "introspective voyager" reflects the central
existential premise, again, of the primacy of the subjective life.
When Stevens claims that in this new stripped-down situation there
is "no help before reality," he depicts man alone, isolated with
his fate, in the universal existential dilemma.

Closely related to existential thought, which is a form of
rebellion against existing philosophies and a call for a new
understanding of the individuality and dignity of man, is part II,
"Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan," which deals with the idea
of a sharpening of the senses as Crispin rejects an old fiction or
system for a new one. Supporting this hypothesis is Fuchs, who
states: "Like Stevens, Crispin engages in the stripping away of
old forms and beliefs." As noted before, the color symbolism in
Stevens is an important part of his poetry; the reds, yellows,
oranges, and various hues of these colors indicate the establishment
of new ideas and beliefs for Stevens, as shown in the following passage:

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4 Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 44.
In Yucatan, the Maya sonneteers
Of the Caribbean amphitheatre,
In spite of hawk and falcon, green toucan
And joy, still to the night-bird made their plea,
As if raspberry tanagers in palms,
High up in orange air, were barbarous, (II, 1-6)

and also in this:

Scenting the jungle in their refuges,
So streaked with yellow, blue and green and red
In beak and bud and fruity goblet-skins,
That earth was like a jostling festival
Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,
Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth. (II, 53-58)

Like the atheistic existentialists, Stevens centers his new fiction
or belief in this material world, the "Caribbean amphitheatre," and
he allows total control of the imagination in the projection of a
"barbarous" and "jungle" type of freedom as Crispin, the subjective
being, pictures the earth, which is man's only paradise and only
chance, in its most sensual aspects of "raspberry tanagers," of
"seeds grown fat," and of "gold's maternal warmth." This, of course,
is similar to Sartre's ideas on the imagination and its perception
as colored by the emotions; an optimistic note of existentialism is
also evident as Stevens gives man the freedom to become, not merely
be. Thus, Crispin becomes "... as other freemen are/Sonorous
nutshells rattling inwardly" (II, 26-27), the existential being who
turns inward. Ending on an existential stress on freedom and the
introspective problem of self-hood, the stanza declares of Crispin:

... His mind was free
And more than free, elate, intent, profound
And studious of a self possessing him. (II, 89-91)

The adjective "elate" is important in showing Stevens as dedicated
to the exuberance and joy of existential freedom, a joy and optimism
that Sartre claimed for the new philosophy, but did not describe in
his novels. Stevens has moved into this special hopeful ground, in the light of his claim that while philosophy may be negative, poetry must be a celebration.

In "Approaching Carolina," section III, Crispin tends to oscillate between the romantic imagination (the world of the unauthentic) and the bleaker, more barren world of the authentic, as these lines indicate:

Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not,
A minor meeting, facile, delicate.
A fluctuating between sun and moon. (III, 45-46, 49)

The "moonlight," representing the romantic illusions of the imagination, is a "delicate" escape from the harsh realities of the human condition, and Crispin fluctuates between the realistic "sun" and the romantic "moon." Yet at the end of this section, Crispin, the subjective existential being, finally achieves a meaningful authentic relationship between reality and the imagination:

The moonlight fiction disappeared.
He savored rankness like a sensualist.
He marked the marshy ground around the dock,
The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,
It purified. It made him see how much
Of what he saw he never saw at all. (III, 72, 84-88)

Now, for Crispin, stark reality appears as he does away with illusive dreams, which are no longer possible. He now sees what he tried to evade--the harsh realities of the human situation (the "marshy ground," the "railroad spur," and the "rotten fence"). This bleak, somewhat absurd condition faced by an isolated man is strongly existential in import. And as Francis Murphy points out, "Like the woman of 'Sunday Morning,' Crispin accepts his ties to the natural
world, a world of change and decay, a world good in itself, . . .
and the poet who writes of this world has only the strength of his
own imagination to fall back upon."  

In part IV, "The Idea of a Colony," Crispin makes the switch
from "... man is the intelligence of his soil," to "... his soil
is man's intelligence." With this discovery, Crispin is being true
to himself; he is acting in "good faith" when he discovers and
accepts his existence in terms of the commonplace, the true
structures of reality. For Stevens (as for Camus) man must accept
the absurd, mundane life and in an ironic sense be happy. Accepting
these structures of the absurd and commonplace, Crispin, through the
subjective imagination, establishes his art as a poet and speculates
on the idea of new forms and fictions:

Upon these premises propounding, he
Projected a colony that should extend
To the dusk of a whistling south below the south,
The man in Georgia waking among pines
Should be pine-spokeman. The responsive man,
Planting his pristine cores in Florida,
Should prick thereof, not on the psaltery,
But on the banjo's categorical gut,
Tuck, tuck, . . . . (IV, 49-58)

Somewhere in the "south below the south," Crispin creates the
essence of a "hemisphere," the idea of a "colony"--the system of a
new fiction or new belief. Yet Crispin remains true to primary
existential logic, seeking the authentic life in "good faith" wherein
man should play on the "banjo's categorical gut" the genuine song of
man, instead of on the "psaltery" some obsolete song. Though Crispin
is presented in the comic aspect of the "clown," he is an "aspiring

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5 Murphy, "The Comedian as the Letter C," p. 89.
clown," as he sheds the masks of society and attempts to live with integrity, as the following passage indicates:

He could not be content with counterfeit,  
With masquerade of thought, with hapless words  
That must belie the racking masquerade. (IV, 82-84)

Thus, as Crispin accepts the existential principle of the free subject, he can no longer accept any "counterfeit."

In part V, "A Nice Shady Home," Crispin's optimistic idea of the colony vanishes:

Crispin dwelt in the land and dwelling there  
Slid from his continent by slow recess  
To things within his actual eye, alert  
To the difficulty of rebellious thought  
When the sky is blue . . .

So Crispin hasped on the surviving form,  
For him, of shall or ought to be in is. (V, 11-15, 34-35)

Of course, the existentialists believe that only when man comes to grips with his situation and refuses romantic daydreams is he able to make the best possible choice for himself in his absurd condition. So is the case with Crispin as he dwells in the "land" and gradually loses his dream of his "continent"; Crispin, "alert," to the problems involving the romantic imagination--"when the sky is blue"--concentrates on actuality or reality ("of shall or ought to be in is"). Thus, after the dissolvement of his too utopian plan, Crispin marries and settles himself to the mundane world. However, this stage is not without an existential questioning, as Crispin says:

What is one man among so many men?  
What are so many men in such a world?  
Can one man think one thing and think it long? (V, 51-53)

Crispin has realized that group projects represent a false direction, and that "one man," the isolated existent, constitutes the primary area of concern.
"And Daughters with Curls," section VI, is a continuation of Crispin in his aspects of the absurd. Here Crispin contemplates four daughters:

. . . four mirrors blue
That should be silver, four accustomed seeds
Hinting incredible hues, four selfsame lights.
That spread chromatics in hilarious dark. (VI, 60-63)

As children revive again the youthful, imaginative, and romantic impulses of parents, so do Crispin's four daughters ("four mirrors blue") stir again the romantic impulse and spread a certain "light" in the "hilarious dark." The "hilarious dark" suggests not only the vast open and uncertain regions that existentialism assumes, but also the joyous and comic possibilities that Stevens believes poets should discover in the regions of the absurd. The poem ends in the irony of these lines:

And so distorting, Crispin proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?

An obvious existential term in this passage is the word "nothing."

It is especially significant that Stevens uses it here at the end of the poem. If Crispin has concluded "fadedly," he has done so through the quest of the introspective self in the light of truth and "good faith," as Sartre insists man should do. The nothingness is a reminder that the subjective, unsponsored, and completely free man, with no divine plan to advance and no sure goal to seek, is always close to nihilism.

In conclusion, one can maintain that the poem, existentially, concerns the subjective man shaping his essence in the process of trying to maintain "good faith." As R. P. Blackmur states: "The poem
expounds the shifting of a man's mind between sensual experience and its imaginative interpretation, the struggle, in that mind, of the imagination for sole supremacy and the final slump or ascent where the mind contents itself with interpreting plain and common things. Just such a comedown, a lowering of sights, is called for by most existential thinkers.

In the discussion of the shorter poems, the presentation will be in the order of their appearance in the collection. The first selection is "The Snow Man," a poem dealing with the relationship of the imagination and reality. In its existential aspect, the poem takes on meaning as the absurdity of the human condition is implied; the entire poem suggests and reiterates this existential point in the following manner:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

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The repetition of the word "nothing" by Stevens in the last two lines is an apparent existential stress, as well as the entire line: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Since life is absurd for the existentialist, man, who is born by chance, who exists, and who dies by chance, is "nothing," in a sense, and reality is also "nothing." Speculating on Stevens' meaning, William Tindall feels that "the nothingness . . . is that of mathematical abstraction, the universe of twentieth-century science, emptier and even more discouraging than Hardy's nineteenth-century universe." And C. Roland Wagner sees the last two lines as an indication that "human values are seen to be relative and unsubstantial, and nothing from the point of view of the contemplating intellect." Words such as "misery" and "bare" also indicate the existential predicament with its bleakness and despair. It may be, however, that the "nothing" observed as actual implies Stevens' view that the physical structures of reality cannot be perceived purely as they really are, but can only be perceived in some human coloring of emotion and imagination, as Sartre claims. Whether this meaning is more likely than the suggestions of Tindall or Wagner, or not, all three possibilities point to existential premises.

As the title of the next poem, "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," indicates, Stevens discusses slight variations of meaning in a quotation from William Carlos Williams with underlying

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existential implications of the atheistic and the subjective free
man. Addressing the "ancient star," a heavenly being, Stevens says:

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

As Sartre and Camus believe, man is his only god; God may exist, but
he has no control over man and his actions; it is man, alone, who is
responsible for the shaping of his own nature and the choices that
he makes. The lines in Stevens' poem indicate that there is no
greater power for Stevens beyond mere being, for the star representing
the idea of God shines "alone" and "mirrors nothing"; man,
unsponsored, free, shapes his own destiny. In the second stanza, a
continuation of this idea is evident in the first two lines, in
which Stevens again addresses the star: "Lend no part to any
humanity that suffuses/You in its own light." It has been previously
pointed out that Sartre, Camus, and Stevens do not necessarily deny
the existence of a God or heavenly being; instead, they take the
position that an assumed deity has "no part" in the destiny of man.
Implying this in the above lines, Stevens points out that man
"suffuses" or overspreads the light of the "ancient star," that is,
the God idea is wholly a human concept, and no more.

A poem rejecting orthodox religion and projecting the subjective
freedom of the imagination is "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman."

Indicative of Stevens' views of the mind as the creator of the
fictions of the world is the following passage:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That's clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets...

Existentialism has stressed the importance of the subjective free
man as the first and primary tenet of its philosophy; man is the
ground or base of his being. Stevens indicates that all human
existence is built on fiction, and that "poetry is the supreme
fiction." Therefore, for Stevens, value systems are all in the
mind—a creation of the subjective "I." With this view, Stevens
says that man can "take the moral law" and erect an orthodox
religion in which the mind is like "citherns" (stringed instruments)
desiring "hymns." But man could just as well take "the opposing
law" and erect a religion of bawdiness (the opposite of
Christianity), which Stevens perhaps sees as a part of his new
spiritual vision. Such a view is in line with atheistic
existentialism, for it rejects existing philosophies and allows
radical new systems of value. In addition, Stevens presents a
view of the absurd in his typical comic spirit:

. . . Allow,
Therefore, that in the planetary scene
Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.

Stevens pokes fun at the ascetic religions in a tone of joyous
exuberance. As this passage indicates, such Christians lived in
"bad faith" ("disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,/Smacking their
muzzy bellies in parade"). In the last two lines, Stevens takes his
neo-pagan approach—the improbable "jovial hullabaloo" that the absurd Christians could create "among the spheres."

In the next poem, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," Stevens, again, presents a bawdy aspect of reality as he revolts against conventional views of death. Like Camus, Stevens is a man in revolt against the ordered structures of society. Instead of conforming to the customs of society in regards to conducting a funeral, Stevens proclaims a joyous party celebrating the sensuous order. The key line for the poem, existentially, is: "Let he be finale of seem," in which the immediate and not the past is revelant. And of this line Stevens states: "... The true sense ... is let being become the conclusion or dénouement of appearing to be: in short, icecream is an absolute good. The poem is obviously not about icecream, but about being as distinguished from seeming to be." Stevens stresses the fact that the living must become more sensuous. The corpse is surely a symbol of the death of irrelevant philosophies; however, existentialism, a relevant philosophy since it is concerned with the authentic man rooted in the sensuous world, is implied as the framework of a new point of view. The "wenches" in this poem, again, suggest that man's sexual nature must loom large in the new frame of reference.

"Tea at The Palaz of Hoon" is, as Joseph N. Riddel points out, "one of Stevens' first successful masks . . . the mythical Moon is the self in all its potential, the imagination as it were at the height of its powers, eloquent and commanding." Existential

9 Letters of Wallace Stevens, p. 341.
10 Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 64.
themes of atheism and subjectivity are at the center of this poem, in which the imagination reigns over reality. The following lines are indicative of this:

What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

Again the main tenet of existential thought—that man is free, unsponsored, and the creator of his essence—emerges in these lines. As the repetition of "I" expounds the theme of the subjectivity of man as well as man's freedom in the shaping of his being, so do the words "saw," "heard," and "felt" give value to the sensual perception. The "sea" becomes a releasing agent for the creative mind as is also in "The Comedian as the Letter C" when Crispin recognizes the full capacity of the imagination during a sea journey. Stevens shows that even the vast and complex ocean is not as vast or complex as man.

The next poem, "Sunday Morning," reveals the neo-pagan attitudes of Stevens in his attack on the hypocrisy and bad faith involved in formalized religion. The obvious existential reference is the free, unsponsored man as he refuses help from any outside force. This atheistic or agnostic attitude, as well as Stevens' secular views on death, are prevalent throughout the poem. Divided into eight stanzas or sections, "Sunday Morning" opens with a woman contemplating the relevancy of orthodox Christianity while at the same time speculating on a new fiction or religion symbolized by
the "cockatoo" and "the pungent oranges and bright, green wings"--
the religion of the sensual. A central existential assertion occurs in the second stanza--"Divinity must live within herself." With this line comes the rejection of God and the premise that man, alone, is the center of value. In the next stanza, Stevens asks: "And shall the earth/Seem all of paradise that we shall know?" This, of course, is a strong endorsement of the existential and agnostic man who accepts nothing beyond death, because the freedom of man ends here. Stevens states that "death is the mother of beauty," probably meaning that the death principle causes creatures to be beautiful and sexual, since their time is limited. Thus Stevens, like Sartre and Camus, seeks meanings only in the natural order, no matter how tragic and painful it may be. Furthermore, in complete revolt against the orthodox, Stevens projects a religion of the future:

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.

Here a group exploits the sensual order in their "devotion to the sun," a symbol for reality, which must serve as a substitute for God. These ideas of the atheistic subjective man and the repudiation of Christianity are reiterated in stanza eight:

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or Island solitude, unsponsored, free.

And in the final lines, Stevens states that there are no gods on our mountains as he denounces Christianity in the following pagan assertions:
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 flicks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The final denunciation of Christianity is evident as the "... pigeons ... sink/Downward to darkness..." Riddel points out that this poem "is only the initial statement from which Stevens was to launch quest after imaginative quest into the nature of being and the self," and that "Stevens is absorbed by existential challenges... most simply the need for personal rather than institutional ceremonies of order."

One of the best examples of the existentially flavored ironic comic tone in Stevens is "Bantams In Pine-Woods":

Chieftain Iffucan of azcon in Caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damn'd universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
Your world is you, I am my world.

As the word "bantams" in the title suggests the aggressive person, so does the poem itself contain two aggressive and cocky people--Chieftain Iffucan and the persona, "I." Stevens sees the Chieftain as a figure living in self-deception, a "damn'd universal cock" acting "as if the sun/Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail."
The persona "I" rejects the other as "Fat!" (vain, over-stuffed, and stupid) as he expounds the existential premise--"Your world is

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11 Ibid., p. 85.
12 Ibid., p. 80.
you. I am my world." In agreement is Herbert J. Stern, who sees
the Iffican as "a metaphysical strutter who would reduce reality to
the services of his own falsifying imagination."\(^\text{13}\) Stern also sees
the persona "I" as an "inchling because . . . the particulars of
experience for which he speaks exist in themselves and for themselves,
and thus deny the possibility of art, of structured imaginative
response."\(^\text{14}\) Therefore, even though man is free to create his own
essence, he often acts in modes too narrow and too cocky, and
falsifies the human condition.

Doubt and disbelief characterize the theme of "Palace of the
Babies." Although the philosophy of Sartre and Camus contains an
optimistic outlook as it focuses on the freedom of man to shape and
create, it also stresses the bleaker, more despairing aspects of
atheistic man, abandoned, in anguish, because he is "condemned to be
free." Such is the case with Stevens in the following passages:

The disbeliever walked the moonlit place,
\[\ldots\]
The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
And each blank window of the building balked
His loneliness and what was in his mind:
\[\ldots\]
Night nursed not him in whose dark mind
The clambering wings of birds of black revolved,
Making harsh torment of the solitude.

The walker in the moonlight walked alone,
And in his heart his disbelief lay cold.
His broad-brimmed hat came close upon his eyes.

Evidence of atheism is the "disbeliever," who exists in "his
loneliness" as man, abandoned and despairing. Stevens further

\(^\text{13}\) Stern, Wallace Stevens: The Art of Uncertainty, p. 113.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., p. 113.
implies despair as he discusses the turmoil in the mind—the "dark," "black," and "harsh torment" of "solitude."

The structures of reality and the creative imagination receive an existential emphasis in "Gubbinal," which reads as follows:

That strange flower, the sun,  
Is just what you say.  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,  
That animal eye,  
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,  
That seed,  
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,  
And the people are sad.

Similar to Sartre's views on the difference of each man's perception as it is colored by the emotions is the implication made by Stevens in the opening lines of the poem, in which he says that the "flower" and the "sun" are "what you say," and he reiterates this again as he mentions the "animal eye," the "savage of fire," and the "seed." Stevens implies that man must make the best of the situation in which "The world is ugly,/And the people are sad."

Stevens seems to be suggesting that the world can be made ugly or sad if people choose to imagine it so. He implies that it is a shame that their imagination is so impoverished and gloomy, and that other styles of imagination are greatly needed.

Again the death theme as the end of man's existence is employed in "The Death of a Soldier":

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.

All existence for the atheistic existentialist is absurd, but most of all death is absurd since it ends man's freedom; there is no God; therefore, there is no life beyond the earth--man is the center of his being. Stevens coldly expounds this theory as he depicts the fall of the soldier beyond customary funeral rites not "calling for pomp" or ceremony, which he rejects in his revolt against the orthodox view of society, and he states that "death is absolute and without memorial." Maintaining the atheistic attitude to the end, Stevens emphasizes the fact that there is no transcendent purpose over man: "The clouds go, nevertheless,/In their direction." That is, the heavens are indifferent.

In the short poem "Negation," Stevens pictures a hypothetical creator as "... blind,/Struggling toward his harmonious whole," as the "incapable master of all force." The creator may be out there, but he has no effective control. Also, in "Negation" Stevens posits the harsh truth of our "brief lives" ended by death.

As in "Bantams in Pine-Woods," the bantering comic mode and the foolishness of improper life styles come to focus in "The
Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade." Existential attitudes about the falsity of the human situation appear in these lines:

Capitan Frodundo, Capitan geloso,
Ask us not to sing standing in the sun,
Hairy-backed and hump-armed,
Flat-rubbed and big-bagged
There is no pith in music
Except in something false.

Sing in clownish boots
Strapped and buckled bright.

Wear the breeches of a mask,
Coat half-flare and half galloon;
Wear a helmet without reason,
Tufted, tilted, twirled, and twisted.

The false man is pictured "hairy backed and hump-armed," and he proclaims that "there is no pith in music/Except in something false." The self-deception involved in the "breeches of a mask" reinforces the foolishness of man in "... clownish boots/Strapped and buckled bright." And there "must be the vent of pity" in the condition of man in this state. It is very probable that Stevens is satirizing the simple-minded revolutionaries who cannot perceive what a great revolution is really needed.

As in the early period of Stevens' writings, the middle period, represented by The Man With The Blue Guitar (1936) and including Ideas of Order and Parts of a World (1942), reveals further indication of the existential bias in the mind of Stevens. Moreover, the long poem "The Man With the Blue Guitar" is an excellent example of the existential attitudes of Stevens at this time. Primarily the poem is about the resolution of the problem of imagination and reality: the imagination cannot function independently from reality. William Burney divides the poem into three sections composed of ten
stanzas each, with the last three stanzas in each section as summaries. According to Burney, the first section relates the difficulty of the poet's trying to imagine people as they are; the second section deals with the poet's perception of the ordinary and his concern with an identity apart from this; and the third part shows how the poet employs his imagination to embody all forces in nature (destructive and creative), and how poetry affirms reality.

Existentially, the poem can be viewed in light of the subjective free imagination molding its perception within the structures of reality. In one sense the first ten stanzas are a debate between the guitarist, representative of the imagination, and the people, representatives of reality. The following passage is an example:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are." (I, 3-10)

The main existential tenet of the subjective creative self becomes evident as the imaginative guitarist shapes the essence of reality through the creative imagination. The people want something beyond the inadequacy of the simple given world, yet it still must be "things exactly as they are," construed by man; however, the guitarist (or poet) does not have in view a complete hero, who would be representative of man, as indicated in these lines: "I sing a hero's

---

head, large eye/And bearded bronze, but not a man" (II, 3-4). This is an important proof that Stevens, as existentialism dictates, cannot envision a complete man because no form, no idea, no universal exists clarifying what such a man must be. And in stanza five, there is the challenge to a religious system as the people say, "There are no shadows in our sun" and "the earth, for us, is flat and bare" (V, 4, 7). Stevens implies that "shadows" (or gods) do not exist in reality, and the earth is as the existentialists define it--"flat and bare." Yet since Stevens sees poetry as a celebration, he can emerge beyond the existential despair and anticipate a possible heaven lying in poetry. In stanza seven Stevens poses the antithesis of the sun and moon--reality and imagination:

It is the sun that shares our works.  
The moon shares nothing. It is a sea.

When shall I come to say of the sun,  
It is a sea; it shares nothing. (VII, 1-4)

Most critics agree that the sun represents reality and that the moon represents the romantic for Stevens, and in the above passage Stevens states that the "sun" is the sharer of man's "works," not the "moon," which signifies "nothing." This may be seen as the existential call to man to put aside false beliefs and face up to a leaner, harsher universe, symbolized by the sun. Since even the sun (or reality) is subject to imagination, it also is questionable. Existential freedom to move onto new ground is seen in these lines:

And I am merely a shadow hunched
Above the arrowy, still strings,
The maker of a thing yet to be made. (IX, 4-6)
Just as Sartre stresses the need of man to become god, so does Stevens indicate this as he envisions the poet as "the maker of a thing yet to be made." And once again in the next stanza appears the subjective free man--"Here am I"--as well as a view of each existent terminated by death: "Ever the prelude to your end,/The touch that topples men and rock" (X, 15-16).

Life, of course, as pictured by the existentialist is absurd because there is no reason behind existence. Likewise, for Stevens, a picture of this absurd condition of mankind is signified by these lines in the second section:

The fields entrap the children, brick
Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.
The discord merely magnifies. (XI, 7-10)

Man is entrapped in this absurdity of life; he is "wingless and withered"; but Stevens, in a more optimistic manner than Sartre and Camus, turns the ludicrous and incongruous aspects of life in a positive direction. He accepts the discord as an enrichment of existence, as something that "magnifies" the human condition.

Also the first few stanzas of the second section deal with the mystery of art and its power to recreate man:

... The blue guitar
And I are one...

That which momentously declareth
Itself not to be I and yet
Must be... (XII, 1-2, 10-11)

The following four stanzas involve, in part, the conflict with nature, seen as "an oppressor that grudges them their death,/As it grudges the living that they live" (XVI, 5-6).
Moving again to the subjective persona of the existential imagination, stanza seventeen treats the vivid and aggressive imagination as a free spirit with no form:

Speak of the soul, the mind. It is
An animal. The blue guitar--

On that its claws propound, its fangs
Articulate its desert days. (XVII, 3-6)

The aggressive mind is an "animal" pictured with "claws" and "fangs" as it tries to cope with the meaninglessness of life--"desert days." The concluding stanza in this section again points out the conflict of the mind with the world and the resolution of the two, in which the imagination must work within the structures of reality. The following lines illustrate:

That I may reduce the monster to
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster, be more than part
Of it, more than the monstrous player of

One of its monstrous lutes, not be
Alone, but reduce the monster and be,

Two things, the two together as one,
And play of the monster and of myself,

Or better not of myself at all,
But of that as its intelligence. (XIX, 1-10)

Man, in the existential light, is master of his own being; there is no such thing as human nature. Only a "universality of condition" exists, as Sartre points out, in relation to the physical, to the structures of society, and to the laws of nature. In these lines, Stevens implies a "universality of condition" in relation to the laws of nature; nature exists as a "monster," and it must be reduced or resolved by the creative imagination--"its intelligence." Nature
as "monster" points to the absurd, yet man as poet finds such a universe greatly shapeable and satisfying.

The general theme of the third section is the affirmation of reality in the realm of the imagination. In stanza twenty-one, the existential atheistic man is "a substitute for the gods" (XXI, 1), and "alone . . ./Lord of the body. . . ." (XXI, 3-4). Poetry is a celebration "in the universal intercourse," and "one keeps on playing year by year;/Concerning the nature of things as they are" (XXIII, 13-14). In stanza twenty-five, the comic tone is employed:

The cats had cats and the grass turned gray
And the world had worlds, ai, this-a-way:
The grass turned green and the grass turned gray.

And the nose is eternal, that-a-way.
Things as they were, things as they are,

Things as they will be by and by . . .
A fat thumb beats out ai-yi-yi. (XXV, 8-14)

As in "The Comedian as the Letter C," the poet discovers that "soil is man's intelligence," and the rooted-in-earth imagination has a delightful range of possibility. Moreover, the poet expounds this subjective existential premise:

Here I inhale profounder strength
And as I am, I speak and move

And things are as I think they are
And say they are on the blue guitar. (XXVIII, 11-14)

Thus, in the final analysis, man is stripped of pre-ordained attributes, and is set existentially free to seek authentic selfhood:

"You as you are? You are yourself./The blue guitar surprises you"
(XXXII, 11-12).
The shorter poems of this period also embody existential attitudes. "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," in general terms, is a poem discussing the failings of government and the possibility of a new politics. Existentially, the poem takes root in the subjective man as he denies any higher power in the monotonous, mundane, absurd life in which nothing changes; only the days come and go. A popular figure for Camus is the masked man, the absurd man, who practices self-deception in his role in society as his self-dignity is diffused and weakened. In the absurd life Stevens here describes, "too many waltzes have ended," or in other words, too many attempts at government and order have failed; yet "there's that mountain-minded Hoon, for whom desire was never that of the waltz." However, Hoon, as the subjective "I," "who found all form and order in solitude," practiced a form of Sartrian "bad faith" because his "shapes were never the figures of men," and "now, for him, his forms have vanished." The world is chaotic, and as man flounders, looking for direction, he often appears absurd. Stevens shows this in the following passage:

There is order in neither sea nor sun.  
The shapes have lost their glistening.  
There are these sudden moles of men,

These sudden clouds of faces and arms,  
An immense suppression, freed,  
These voices crying without knowing for what,

Except to be happy, without knowing how,  
Imposing forms they cannot describe,  
Requiring order beyond their speech.

As Stevens implies, there is no order in the structures of reality ("sea nor sun"). Mobs try to impose justice "crying without knowing for what" and instigating reforms "beyond their speech" or potential.
Here, in the group, the individuality and self-dignity of man is suppressed. With the ending of "too many waltzes--The epic of disbelief/Blares oftener and soon, will soon be constant"; and only with the creation of a new fiction by the imaginative mind will this chaotic disorder come to an end, as the following passage indicates:

Some harmonious skeptic soon in skeptical music
Will unite these figures of men and their shapes
Will glisten again with motion, the music
Will be motion and full of shadows.

The poem which could be a companion to "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" is "Dance of Macabre Mice," in which the forms of existing government are satirized. It reads thus:

In the land of turkeys in turkey weather
At the base of the statue, we go round and round.
What a beautiful history, beautiful surprise!
Monsieur is on horseback. The horse is covered with mice.

This dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
We dance it out to the tip of Monsieur's sword,
Reading the lordly language of the inscription,
Which is like zithers and tambourines combined:

The founder of the State. Whoever founded
A State that was free, in the dead of winter,
from mice?
What a beautiful tableau tinted and towering,
The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil!

If an old system does not stress the subjective basis of the dignity of man, according to existentialists it is bad, and a new system or idea should replace the preceding one, for the human situation is bad enough without additional problems. In the chaotic human predicament, the absurd man is relying on the old system which serves its purpose no longer, and "monsieur ... on horseback" is just as ridiculous as
the men who "go round and round" the statue. This vulgar political
state has no name; it is a merciless and ghastly "dance" in tune to
the statue's "inscription." And in this line--"... Whoever
founded/A State that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?"--
is the ironic-tragic awareness of the real aspect of the human
situation. Moreover, a tone of revolt is implied as Stevens talks
of the "hungry dance" and satirizes "the Founder of the State"
cast in "bronze." The state is seen as part of the falsity, and
hope placed in it is misplaced. The only valid hope must be in
the inner man.

"The Idea of Order At Key West" is an important poem about
the subjective woman in connection with the sea, and it is
existential in the sense that the female persona is the maker who
has power over all external structures, even the sea. The primary
existential premise, which places man as the highest power, is
evidenced in these lines:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
        . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? We said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

Stressing the subjective being, Stevens emphasizes the fact that "it
was she and not the sea" who was the creator of the "song she sang."
The woman represents the creative spirit in the solitude or loneliness
of man abandoned by heavenly powers:
It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

This subjective freedom of the "single artificer of the world" is
one of "solitude," for in the imagination is the "world" of the
woman. After the singing has ended in the last stanza, Stevens,
who sees the poet as the one who opens doors to a better world,
says this in relation to the poet's function: "Words of the
fragrant portals, dimly-starred." Again, though existential
shaping is celebrated, no final absolute ideal is possible.

That the answer to being lies within the self is the theme
of "A Fading of the Sun." Though man is abandoned and alone in
his condemnation to be free, he must not despair, but must try to
choose the best, because as Sartre sees it, man is not only
responsible to self, but to all mankind. An assertion of the
despair involved in man's absurd condition is in the following
lines:

When people awaken
And cry and cry for help?

The tea is bad, bread sad.
How can the world so old be so mad
That the people die?

Of course, the word "die" in the last line is not the finality of
death as it ends freedom, but rather the death in life of impoverished
people. As existentialism places the responsibility in man himself,
so does this next stanza:
If joy shall be without a book
It lies, themselves within themselves,
If they will look
Within themselves
And cry and cry for help?

The answer to what man makes of himself is not found outside in the
structure of the real, but rather it is in the self as man formulates
and creates his own nature.

Indeed, man is the captain of his being and the master of his
fate, as the title of the next poem--"The Latest Freed Man"--suggests.
As Stevens sees it, although man possesses this freedom which the
existentialists stress, he sometimes fails to use it. The opening
line states that the man is "tired of the descriptions of the
world"--the old fictions; he is now declaring his freedom, as these
lines indicate:

... He bathes in the mist
Like a man without a doctrine. The light he gives--
It is how he gives his light... .

As has been stated before, Sartre and Camus believe that man must
be true to himself and practice "good faith," and in speaking of the
"light" of the "freed man," Stevens emphasizes the importance of
"how he gives his light," which implies the importance of living in
"good faith." However, the important thing is that man creates his
essence and relates his own being to the world. Stevens shows
this in saying:

And so the freed man said
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
To be without a description of to be.
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
To have the ant of the self changed to an ox.
Each man has this freedom, but some never recognize the "ox" or the strength; however, "it was how he was free; it was how his freedom came;/ it was being without description, being an ox." And most of all, "it was everything being more real, himself/At the centre of reality, seeing it." This poem is an especially clear assertion of the primacy of the subjective self.

"The United Dames of America" could be counted as a sequel to the previous poem since its theme also is the importance of the individual and the possibility of the new fiction. According to existential thought, the singular man is squashed as society attempts to degrade individuality and human dignity. The following lines are illustrations of this idea:

The mass is nothing. The number of men in a mass
Of men is nothing. The mass is no greater than
The singular man of the mass.

Stevens emphasizes the nothingness of the "mass"; the "mass" is useless, not as basic as the "singular man." As Stevens shows, existentialism is a revolt against existing and often communal philosophies which fail to relate to the individual dignity of man.

The following passage is instructive:

... There are not leaves
Enough to hide away the face of the man
Of this dead mass and that. The wind might fill
With faces as with leaves, be gusty with mouths,
And with mouths crying and crying day by day.
Could all these be ourselves, sounding ourselves,
Our faces circling round a central face.

And then nowhere again, away and away?

The evident political overtones in this poem clarify the "central face" image (the government head) as well as the "faces" of the
unsatisfied mass who clamor around the central figure. Furthermore, Stevens points out that as old systems die away, there are not enough "leaves" to cover the "dead," the vacant emptiness of man as he seeks new direction in this misguided world. Yet in the last stanza, Stevens points out that:

There are not leaves enough to crown, To cover, to crown, to cover--let it go-- The actor that will at last declaim our end.

Thus, there is hope of a projection of a new fiction or form of government if some actor (some artist) will perform his task.

The game motif of what seemingly is and what really is appears in the deception of the "empty house" and the deception of the myth of God in "The Sense Of the Sleight-Of-Hand Man." As Sartre relates in his novel _La Nausée_, life is a monotonous repetition of days which come and go without reason--the life of the absurd. Such is the case with Stevens in the following stanza:

One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths, One's tootings at the weddings of the soul Occur as they occur. So bluish clouds Occurred above the empty house and the leaves Of the rhododendrons rattled their gold, As if someone lived there. . . .

Thus, happenings occur by chance; it may be the intelligent man that is duped, and as Camus finds a certain hope in the recognition of the absurd, Stevens places it in the "ignorant man":

It may be that the ignorant man, alone, Has any chance to mate his life with life . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

Such an "ignorant" man is stripped of obsolete metaphysics, thus fitting existential patterns. As in many of Stevens' poems, that
existential probing by the atheistic, neo-pagan mind is also evident
in such lines as "The wheel survives the myths;/The fire eye in the
clouds survives the gods."

The theme of "Yellow Afternoon" is man as he locates "his
being" in the structures of reality. And, predictably, the
subjectivity of man affords the hope:

It was in the earth only
That he was at the bottom of things
And of himself. There he could say
Of this I am. . . .

As the subjective I, "there he touches his being; there as he is/
He is." Here Stevens sketches the existential down-to-earth thrust,
in opposition to all previous upward and celestial directions.

Giving a picture of the human condition in time of war,
Stevens in "Martial Cadenza" projects a hope that the world will
again take some meaning. As Sartre and Camus state in their
philosophy of existentialism, the human situation at any time or
any place is absurd, void of meaning as man exists only in the
face of death--the final end to all freedom. The following lines
of "Martial Cadenza" state this:

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
This world, this place, the street in which I was,
Without time; as that which is not has no time,
Is not, or is of what there was, is full
Of the silence before the armies, armies without
Either trumpets or drums, the Commander mute,
the arms
On the ground, fixed fast in a profound defeat.

What had this star to do with the world it lit,
With the blank skies over England, over France
And above the German camps? It looked apart.

Stevens implies the meaninglessness of the human situation as he
discusses the "world without time," the "silence" before the attack
in battle, and the "profound defeat." He also expresses the agnostic point of view as he says of the star: "It looked apart." Stevens, in the main stream of existentialism, is stressing the war years as a water-shed in human thought. The horror and evil and error necessitated a fresh new perspective.

Perhaps the poem "Les Plus Belles Page" is best summarized in the last line: "Theology after breakfast sticks to the eye."

Man and his need to be God is the existential motif. To begin the poem, Stevens uses this antithesis: "Nothing exists by itself./The moonlight seemed to", and in the second stanza, he proposes this scepticism:

The moonlight and Aquinas seemed to. He spoke,  
Kept speaking, of God. I changed the word to man.  
The automation, in logic self-contained, Existed by itself.

Stevens implies that the "moonlight" and "Aquinas" only appeared to be absolute. He changes the word "God" to "man" to correct the error of classical thought, and invoke the new era of agnostic existentialism.

"Asides on The Oboe" is a key poem in Stevens' existential logic. In the first section of the poem, Stevens is stating that it is now time for man to exercise his freedom of choice:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now, Of final belief. So, say that final belief Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

This evident existential attitude places the choice in mankind. And Stevens implies action in his statement that "it is time to choose."

Although existentialists do not have many tenets on which they all
agree, their school of thought is established on the need for philosophy in a new humanistic key. Stevens memorably reflects this principle in the following lines about the desiderated new ideal, the new hero:

The man who has had the time to think enough,  
The central man, the human globe, responsive  
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

Here is the new philosopher's man who exercises his freedom "to think," to sum up man "in a million diamonds." Like a God, the philosopher's man orders his own essence, "cold and numbered." He cries: "Thou art not August unless I make thee so," showing his power over nature. In the predicament of the human situation, the glass man is viewed as a quasi-universal character, yet also as a subjective construct. The following is also instructive of existential thought, stemming from the shock of the great wars:

One year, death and war prevented the jasmine scent  
And the jasmine islands were bloody martyrs.  
How was it then with the Central man? Did we find peace?  
We found the sum of men. We found,  
If we found the central evil, the central good.  
We buried the fallen without jasmine crowns.  
There was nothing he did not suffer, no; nor we.

Here the negative situation of man is pictured as "death and war" destroy the jasmine scent, representing older effete optimism. Any new metaphysics must, as Sartre and Camus illustrate, do justice to evil and failure. As in all existentialism, man, himself, is the focus of value, declared by Stevens in his vision of "the glass man, without external reference"--not to nature or God.

The final poem chosen from this period is "Jumbo," which is concerned with the freedom of man as he chooses and creates his own essence. These lines indicate the theme:
Who was the musician, fatly soft
And wildly free.

Who the transformer, himself transformed,
Whose single being, single form
Were their resemblances to ours?

The companion in nothingness,
Loud, general, large, fat, soft
And wild and free, the secondary man.

Stevens here implies a "being" who is "wildly free" as he transforms himself in the absurd but liberating "nothingness" of life. The "secondary" man, presumably, is the new man who is needed and awaited.

The constant indication of the existential trends in Stevens' poetry is found also in the late period, including Transport to Summer (1947) and Auroras of Autumn (1950). "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the representative long poem of the third period, states Stevens' idea of the imagination and its role in the structures of reality. Stevens stresses a revolt against the old order, which is obsolete, to achieve "good faith" in a meaningful, more subjective system. In the first stanza, Stevens states that the world as perceived through the eye is common--"The eye's plain version is a thing apart./The vulgate of experience" (I, 1-2). Therefore, the common is all we have as primary data, and we must build from this. According to Stevens, there must be a correlation between the imagination and common reality, as indicated in these lines:

Part of the question that is a giant himself;

Dark things without a double, after all,
Unless a second giant kills the first
A recent imagining of reality.
As if the crude collops came together as one,
A mythological form, a festival sphere,
A great bosom, beard and being alive with age.
(I, 4, 10-12, 16-18)

As Stevens indicates, one-half of the "question" is the "giant" of reality and the other half is the "giant" of imagination. One is meaningless and "dark" without the other because reality cannot take on meaning except through the mind, and the imagination needs the structures of reality to find a real and authentic base. And as reality and imagination come together, a new giant—the complete glass man as he mirrors the world, a "festival sphere,"—emerges in a Mardi Gras air, a symbol of Stevens' new fiction. Relating closely to the idea of Sartre's theory on the imagination and the emotion as it colors perception is stanza two, in which Stevens states:

Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
Impalpable habitations that seem to move
In the movement of the colors of the mind. (II, 4-6)

Like Sartre, Stevens believes that the perceptions of each mind are colored by the emotions involved at that particular time. The Mardi Gras tone so typical of Stevens points to the celebration of life that poets must honor, even if philosophers need not. In stanzas six and nine, Stevens reiterates the poet's need for the ordinary: "Reality is the beginning not the end" (VI, 1). Reality is represented by the letter "A," the primitive purity of things, and the letter "Z" represents the great clutter of all accumulated ideas about things. Furthermore, as stanza nine states, "We keep coming back and coming back/To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns." The "hotel" represents secular reality, the "hymns" the
absolute religious views. In stanzas four, eleven, and fourteen Stevens points out that any gospel, to be meaningful, must be found in an ordinary evening in New Haven--"And Juda becomes New Haven or else must" (XI, 9). Here, Stevens places the focus of value in the subjective and existential as he rejects the orthodox for a more personal, genuine, manner of faith. Stanzas twelve and thirteen present reality "... as it is, not as it was" (XII, 3-4) with the existential stress on the individual "solitary in his walk" (XIII, 1) trying to get the essence of "the actual landscape" (XIII, 16). Rejecting the old fictions, Stevens indicates that these are inadequate for the "venerable mask" (XVI, 2) of the now, and, like Sartre, he points to the difficult necessity to clear the mind of clutter from the past:

It is the window that makes it difficult
To say good-bye to the past and to live and to be
In the present state of things... (XVIII, 1-3)

Sartre rejects the past since it has no connection with the possibility of what man may make of himself; it is the now--the present--that counts for him. Here Stevens implies that man wants to leave the "window" of the past open as a possible escape from reality; however, "... to live and to be/ in the present..." is what is important and real. Existentially speaking, man's will is his essence; yet Stevens implies that the free man sometimes wants to escape his will and refuse his freedom, which is a mistake, as this passage indicates:

Because the thinker himself escapes.
And yet
To have evaded clouds and men leaves him
A naked being with a naked will
And everything to make. He may evade
Even his own will and in his nakedness
Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere. (XX, 13-19)

Man is "naked" or bare in the absurd structure of nature; even if he tries to escape through the romantic imagination, he is still the "naked being with a naked will," in which his essence can go in any direction. By deceiving himself, man may try to escape his will through a hypnotic state, but in the final analysis, he cannot escape. In stanza twenty-four, the atheistic neo-pagan rejection of Christianity is implied as Stevens mentions the "statue of Jove" and the sky's "emptiness," and encourages "an escape from repetition"--a rejection of the orthodox. Coming to a firm conclusion in stanzas twenty-seven and twenty-eight, Stevens states:

If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind.

... it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one.

(XXVIII, 1-2, 4-5)

Therefore, man's perceived reality exists only in the structures of the mind, and vice-versa, as the "real and unreal" become "one."

In stanza thirty, Stevens speaks of the "visibility of thought" in relation to reality, and he ends the poem on the existential questioning of what is and what seems:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (XXXI, 16-19)

This is an important rejection of simple-minded materialism, which has held too narrow a view of the complexity of reality.

As "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" reflects perhaps all of the existential elements of Stevens' writings, so do the shorter
poems of this period reflect specific existential motifs. The first chosen is "Crude Foyer," in which Stevens stresses the mind as the "faculty" of the eye:

Thought is false happiness: the idea
That merely by thinking one can,
Or may, penetrate, not may
But can, that one is sure to be able-

That there lies at the end of thought
A foyer of the spirit in a landscape
Of the mind, in which we sit
And wear humanity's bleak crown:

In which we read the critique or paradise
And say it is the work
Of a comedian, this critique
In which we sit and breathe

An innocence of an absolute,
False happiness, since we now that we use
Only the eye as faculty, that the mind
Is the eye. . .

As has been previously stated, Sartre believes man must not only choose for himself and exercise his will, but he must honor authentic being, not the falsely abstract. As Stevens sees it, thought can be "false happiness" if we consider the mind as an end in itself. Man cannot withdraw into his "landscape" of illusions and "wear humanity's bleak crown" without deceiving himself. Stevens here, as in other poems, is striking directly at the classical thought of Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza, and Aquinas, the schools which have assumed false absolutes, rigid human nature, and divine plans. He joins with Sartre and Camus in trying to push out such traditions.

"Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit" is a poem discussing the skepticism about a supreme being beyond the power of man. The poem opens and closes with this evident skepticism:
If there must be a God in the house, must be, 
Saying things in the rooms and on the stair.

Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor, 
Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost

Or Aristotle's skeleton. Let him hang out 
His stars on the wall. He must dwell quietly.

If there must be a god in the house in the house, let him be one 
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,

A vermilioned nothingness, any stick of the mass 
Of which we are too distantly a part.

Since man is the free spirit, Stevens, like Sartre and Camus, denies any higher power than man; God may exist, but the important point is that he does not intervene in the affairs of man. Agnosticism is more evident than atheism in this poem, since Stevens suggests the possibility of a deity; his only function though is as a "ghost" or "skeleton." If there must be a "god," he must be remote and distant—"a vermilioned nothingness." Thus; "It is the human that is the alien,/The human that has no cousin in the moon"; man, alone, is abandoned and condemned to be free.

In "A Word With Jose Rodriguez-Pezo," a picture of the absurd man emerges as people fail to reject old mythologies and create new ones. An example, in the second stanza, of the absurdity of life is the old man who sells oranges during the day and "snores" as he "sleeps by his basket" at night, a mundane, meaningless routine, which is an aspect of the "grotesque." Stevens implies that it is time for man to choose a new meaningful fiction:

... The spirit tires, 
It has, long since, grown tired, 
of such ideas.
It says there is an absolute grotesque.

... Within
The boulevards of the generals...

Ideas must change to meet man's existing needs and desires, and if there is a failure in this area, the "absolute grotesque" strives in the general "boulevards" of life. The "absolute grotesque," apparently, is the vast, free, absurd region which man must come to occupy.

A short but emphatic statement of atheism, in which death is the end for man, is "Flyer's Fall." This passage is instructive:

This man escaped the dirty fates,
Knowing that he died nobly, as he died.

Darkness, nothingness of human after-death,
Receive and keep him in the deepnesses of space.

Death is absolute; it ends freedom and adds to the absurdity of the human predicament, as the atheistic existentialists claim. The only possible hope is the freedom of man's will as he lives. Somehow man can perhaps avoid the "dirty fates" and die "nobly" if he lives in "good faith," making the best possible choices in his responsibility as a free being. However, the "darkness" and "nothingness" of the "after-death" is final, and it, not God, will receive the dead man, and it, not God, should be invoked in something like prayer.

Another poem with the theme of existential nothingness is "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion." Life is just a repetition of scenes:

It is spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,
In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,
The air is full of children, statues, roofs,  
And snow. . . .

Sartre sees life as a meaningless repetition of events and people in his novel *La Nausée*, somewhat in the spirit of this Stevens' poem. As an indication of the inadequacy of the repetition of the old, Stevens states: "... The theatre is spinning round,/Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains." These are interesting indictments of obsolete religion and obsolete optical perceptions as well.

A similarity to "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is found in "Continual Conversation With a Silent Man." Stevens states in his opening lines that ". . . we live and die" between the earth, "the old brown hen, and the old blue sky." The ordinary world is the true setting. The primary existential premise of the subjective man emerges in these lines that stress subjective will: "Of the never-ending storm of will,/One will and many wills. . . ." And in the last two stanzas, the structures of reality play a part in the combination of the imaginative and the real:

It is not a voice that is under the eaves.  
It is not speech, the sound we hear  
In this conversation, but the sound  
Of things and their motion: the other man,  
A turquoise monster moving round.

The imagination must perceive nature as the "other man," a "turquoise monster" in motion, to achieve fulfillment for the creative mind.

"Human Arrangement" shows Stevens commenting on the human situation:
Place-bound and time-bound in evening rain
And bound by a sound which does not change,

Except that it begins and ends,
Begins again and ends again.

The only source for optimism lies within the self, as Stevens states in the last lines of the poem: "The centre of transformations that/
Transform for transformation's self."

In agreement with Sartre that there is no human nature, Stevens develops a key existential idea in "The Good Man Has No Shape":

Through centuries he lived in poverty.  
God only was his only elegance.

Then generation by generation he grew  
Stronger and freer, a little better off.

He lived each life because, if it was bad,  
He said a good life would be possible.

Stevens emphasizes the fact that man has been free in all "centuries," but has failed to recognize that freedom; self-deceived, he waited for the "good life." The will and essence of man lies in his freedom of choice, not in the form of old orthodox beliefs such as Christianity.

In "World Without Peculiarity," there is a re-statement of the resolution of the conflict between the imagination and nature.

In these lines, he posits the dubiousness of reality without the imaginative powers of the mind:

What good is it that the earth is justified,  
That it is complete, that it is an end,  
That in itself it is enough?

Since reality itself is not complete, there must be an intermingling of the creative imagination as it shapes the structures of reality, which is implied in these lines:
And the poverty of dirt, the thing upon his breast,
The hating woman, the meaningless place,
Become a single being, sure and true.

As the imagination takes over in its interpretative powers over nature, the intertwining becomes "sure and true." And as the direction of the "winds" changes, yet continues, so does man in his endless search for being and meaning, rooted firmly in the physical world of dirt and hate.

In the next poem, "Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself," the structures of reality take on meaning only through the imaginative powers of the mind:

At the earliest ending of winter,
  In March, a scrawny cry from outside
  Seemed like a sound in his mind.
  . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
That scrawny cry . . .
  . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
It was part of the colossal sun,

  Surrounded by its Choral-rings
  Still far away. It was like
  A new knowledge of reality.

The mind records its true perception of the structures of reality as a "scrawny cry"; and this "cry" is a part of reality, the "colossal sun," sounded in the distance as a "new knowledge of reality." The "scrawny cry" perhaps suggests the unpleasant human truths that Sartre and Camus stress, the "low" side of human nature that cannot be glossed over by romantic or religious visions. The winter season, as it often does for Stevens, symbolizes the stripping away that existentialists call for--the new view of man not based on illusions.

In the final poem, "The Rock," Stevens makes the poet supreme over the philosopher as his free-shaping imagination gives
a meaning to reality. In part I, he points out the void of life in a conflict between the imagination and reality; and like Sartre and Camus, he presents it as an aspect of the absurd:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
. . . arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

. . . The houses still stand
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar.

Weren't and are not, Absurd . . .

"Absurd," the key term existentially, is a reflection of the "illusion" of life, if the "lives" we have lived are only in the "mind"—things that "were not and are not." However, in part II, the poet with "the body quickened and the mind in root" can make:

. . . meanings of the rock,

That its barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more . . .

As stated in part III, "The rock is the habitation of the whole"—the imagination and reality; Stevens is the poet standing over the philosopher as he celebrates the more optimistic views of the metaphysical, instead of the bleaker, more nauseous views used by Sartre and Camus in their novels. The "barren" absurd state of reality is the seed-bed which gives free play to imagination.

From this representative sampling of Stevens' poetry, one can see the frequently recurring existential themes of the freedom of man shaping his own essence, of the absurd but potentially liberating nature of reality, of the revolt against the old order,
of agnostic atheism and existential death, and of the comic and often tragic aspect of the masks of absurd mankind. However, Stevens rises above the bleaker, more despairing aspects of existentialism, which characterize the philosophy of Sartre and Camus, to become an artist of a "supreme fiction," the complex celebrations of nature and art which the existential artist must spin out to recreate the inner and outer world.
CONCLUSION

As the study of these poems from each period indicates, Wallace Stevens clearly belongs in the realm of existential thought. He does not sacrifice his art for metaphysics and is in the true sense a poet's philosopher. Stevens' concern with metaphysics is closely related to the ideas of Sartre and Camus in these four areas: the shaping freedom of the subjective imagination, the need for agnosticism and metaphysical revolt, the existential stress on death, and the comic yet tragic flavor of life seen in its failings, ambiguities, and exotic possibilities.

The first area dealing with freedom and the primacy of the subjective "I" is the strongest existential theme in Wallace Stevens' poetry. Like Sartre and Camus, who declare the freedom of man, Stevens gives full reign to the imagination, operating on and checking itself against the genuine structures of reality. This freedom allows man to shape his essence within the boundaries of the absurd. Indeed, the truth of absurdity is necessary for the complete freedom Stevens assumes. For Stevens, man's perception of objects is colored by the emotions, just as Sartre describes in his speculations on the imagination and emotions. Such poems as "The Comedian as the Letter C," "A High Toned Old Christian Woman," "The Man With The Blue Guitar," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The Latest Freed Man," "Asides on the Oboe," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "The Rock" express the exuberant freedom of the
imagination, within reality, that Stevens asserts. Although the poet's subject is his perception of the world, Stevens claims that the issue of such perception in art "is not an artifact that the mind has added to human nature. . . . It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. . . . It seems in the last analysis to have something to do with our self preservation."¹

Thus, as a connoisseur of art, Stevens remains "the master of two styles, and the uneasy lover of two worlds--the one that is and the one that might come to be."²

The belief that allows full freedom to man as the maker of his being assumes atheism, or more properly agnosticism, of which Stevens, Sartre, and Camus are ardent advocates. With this denial of the efficacy of God, man is a free agent, abandoned and unsponsored in his search for meaning as he tries to retain an individual dignity that must be rooted in secular humanism. A few of the poems which express this view are "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "Tea at the Palace of Hoon," "Negation," "The Man With The Blue Guitar," "Asides on the Oboe," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "The Good Man Has No Shape," "Vacancy In The Park," and, of course, "Sunday Morning," with its remarkable vision of a new paganism.

Along with agnostic atheism (if this term is allowable) and the freedom of man comes the distinctive stress on death--a finality for the atheistic existentialist. Although Stevens considers death an aspect of the absurd along with Camus and Sartre, he considers

¹Stevens, The Necessary Angel, p. 36.
death as an added valuable dimension to life in that it makes life more important, makes man's perception of the universe more acute, and promotes beauty. Thus, death for Stevens loses the despairing horrifying aspects it receives in Camus and Sartre's philosophy, becoming the more palatable "mother of beauty." Some of the poems which show such a view are "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Death of a Soldier," and "Sunday Morning," the latter being the most essential embodiment of Stevens' view of death.

According to Sartre and Camus, life is absurd. It is absurd that man is born, that he lives, and most of all that he dies, since this ends freedom. Therefore, the entire human situation or condition is absurd or senseless to an abandoned man, alone, as he tries to be the guide of his being. As Sartre indicates, man's only hope is the fact that he is free and that he lives in "good faith"; Camus also believes this, as well as the fact that man must recognize his absurd position in the world and revolt against this absurdity. A similar view is taken by Stevens, since he believes in a rejection of the old fictions and the possibility of a new one; this is especially seen in his rejection of orthodox Christianity and in the possibility of a new "Mardi Gras" type of religion, flavored with the tropics and converting the comic-absurd into a resource for wider choices and freedoms. The absurd is seen in such poems as "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Dance of the Macabre Mice," "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," "Asides on the Oboe," "Chaos In Motion and Not in Motion," "Continual Conversation with a Silent Man," and "Human Arrangement." The motif of revolt against the main philosophic and religious traditions of the past

In dealing with the aspects of the absurd, both Camus and Stevens often employ the comic-tragic spirit and the idea of the ironic mask. For Camus, there is hope only in the possibility that man recognizes and accepts his situation in the absurd world and in some ironic way seeks to be happy. For Stevens and Camus the comic yet tragic spirit is often used to characterize the absurd man who is duped and does not truly recognize his fate. Several poems in which the comic yet tragic spirit and the mask are employed are "The Comedian as the Letter C," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Dance of the Macabre Mice," "Bantams In Pine-Woods," and "The Revolutionalis Stop for Orangeade."

As one can easily see, in many cases one poem encompasses several existential themes or premises, and the existential elements are richly embedded in the poetry of Stevens. He does not sacrifice his art for philosophy; rather, he demonstrates in a fashion of great genius an exciting new style and idiom which are perfect companions for the radical metaphysics of the existentially committed mind.
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