ghosts of our human comedy of life? Do they, within the cold
death, believe that they wander around and around the
sky, freed from death, looking for the kind of heaven they
had expected? Or does their death ("That burial"), con-
firmed by our experience ("pillared up each day") as being
no more than the door and passage of the spirit to mere
nonexistence, foretell to us at night, when we are inclined to
worry about the nature of death, our own death: "the one
abyssal night," when, with the extinction of our conscious-
ness, we will no longer see the stars in the night sky? Make
an outcry among these "dark comedians," who mimic, in
death, the human comedy of life, call them for an answer
from their cold heaven (Elysée) of the night sky, of the
tomb. That they will not answer is our answer.

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP, p. 64)"

The muscular figure with whom the poem opens is a kind
of pleasure master: he produces "big cigars"; he makes tempt-
ing food (whipping "concupiscent curds"—this is close
enough poetic approximation of ice-cream churning to lead
us to conclude that this is the "Emperor" himself); he is
powerful ("muscular"); even the verse here, especially in line
three, is given over to the pleasure of sound, to the fun of
the alliteration which is, then, not merely gratuitous word
play. The poem, in other words, begins by summoning up
the king of pleasure. Moreover, the description of the women
to be present suggests that they are ladies of pleasure—"the
wenches dawdle." Here, however, a new note is introduced,
that of the impoverished commonplace, even common: the
women are not to dress up as for any special occasion; flowers
are to be brought, but, with insistent casualness, they are to
be wrapped in "last month's newspapers." (Stevens says of
the words "concupiscent curds" that "they express the con-
cupiscence of life, but, by contrast with the things in relation
to them in the poem, they express or accentuate life's desti-
tution"—LWS, p. 50c.) Let us not try to make a special
occasion, let us not try to veil the ordinary quality of this
event: let the seeming quality of things yield to the way they
actually are ("Let be be finale of seem"). The only extraor-
dinary thing in this occasion is to be pleasure, for pleasure is
the only power we will recognize to govern us: "The only
emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." Pleasure is the only
force that has dominion over the commonplace.

In the second stanza pleasure is again juxtaposed with the
common. From the cheap dresser ("deal" is a cheap kind of
wood), in depressingly ill repair, take the sheet embroidered
with fantail pigeons (LWS, p. 340) and cover her with that
which she had once enjoyed decorating. Here we recognize
that the occasion is a kind of wake, at which death, too, is
treated as something commonplace, and at which only plea-
sure can give relief from that fatal commonplace to which we
are all reduced. Thus the corpse is covered with the deco-
rative sheet. If the feet stick out they only serve to affirm
the common fact of physical death. There is no more to death
than this, no separation of the soul, no supernatural myth.
The lamp, with its ordinary light, confirms as with the seal
of the commonplace this common fact. Our only resort from
it is to pleasure.

"Sunday Morning" (CP, p. 66)

In "Sunday Morning" the poet conducts a meditation
through the woman whose mind is the scene, so to speak, of
the meditation, resolving the questions that she raises. Unlike
Stevens' later meditative poems, however, this one presents a
cohesive argument rather than a series of reflections. The
blank verse and the diction have little of the extravagant
virtuosity of "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Le Mor-
ocle de Mon Oncle" and, as a result, the poem is itself less
idiosyncratic. The occasion of the poem is the hour for
church. But the setting is one of sensual comfort, "compli-
cencies of the peignoir," which dispels the holiness of the
hour that ordinarily reminds of Christ's sacrifice. From the
outset, then, a conflict is presented between the secular and
the religious which provides the subject of the poem. The
woman, despite the secular setting and because of the reli-
gious hour, feels the encroachment of the religious sensibility.
In reverie she returns across the "wide water" of time and
space to the crucifixion in ancient Palestine, and the memory
of it gives rise to a nostalgia for the balm of religion. The rest
of the poem is concerned with the catharsis of this nostalgia
through reconciliation to existence in a secular world.

The poem has the movement of a dialogue, from idea to
idea modified. Here the dialogue is between the author and
his persona, the former resolving the questions that arise in
the thought of the latter. Thus the train of thought returns
(II) from the memory of the crucifixion to the initial sense
of sensual well being: the oranges and the bright rug, or, pos-
sibly, a real cockatoo on the rug. Cannot such satisfactions
replace the idea of heaven in a secular world? Divinity, with
the power to mediate between man and heaven, can now lie
only in her responses to the physical world, which is the only
kind of heaven she will know. In support of this point a his-
tory of divinity is traced (III), from the nonhuman Jove,
through the partly human Christ in whose divinity man part-
took, to the possibility of the idea of god being wholly
humanized if the idea of heaven were merged in the reality
of earth:

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?

The sky would not then seem a barrier between earth and
heaven but part of the physical world which is the source of
evil as of all good. With such a recognition of the nature
of the physical world, living in harmonious well being with
that world would take its place as a kind of felicity second
only to that possible in the relations among men, or "endur-
ing love."

The woman then raises the question of the transitory char-
acter of such an earthly paradise (IV). The answer is re-
turned that there is no eternal realm of the supernatural ever
imagined that has endured as transitory nature endures in its
seasonal repetitions. More permanent than the nostalgia for
the supernatural is the remembrance of the satisfactions of
nature and the desire that may be consummated in nature
itself:

... her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

She grants that nature offers such fulfillment to mortality, but
insists on the need of a fulfillment that will not pass away,
that is immortal; in contentment with life she is troubled
by the obliteration of death (V). The reply, that carries
through section VI, is a description of the conditions of
mortality that is the crisis of the poem. "Death is the mother
of beauty" because implicit in it is the principle of change,
and in change alone can come fulfillment of desire. Thus
fulfillment, here expressed in terms of the fulfillment of
beauty, is dependent on its transitory nature, and "imperish-
able bliss," the deathless fulfillment of paradise, is therefore
impossible. Although death means the certain obliteration
of experience, it also ensures continuation of the transitory pro-
cess of desire and satisfaction of desire. Death as the principle
of change, and therefore as mother of the processes of life,
ensures their continuation which is mortality's only memorial.
Thus death "makes the willow shiver in the sun" in living
memorial of dead maidens who used to sit gazing on the
grass which they used to tread, and which is now withdrawn
from their feet. Death causes the repetition of desire after
desire has been satisfied and the savers on which the feast
was served have been cast away, a new generation of boys
will inherit the plate of the old and make use of it to tempt a
new generation of maidens (compare Stevens, LWS, p. 183):
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

The life of maidens in their turn taste the fruit and, touched
by desire, "stray impassioned in the littering leaves" which are
the "leaves of sure obliteration" and in which they, nevertheless,
go seeking satisfaction of desire.

By way of illustrating change as the condition of fulfillment,
transitory mortality is compared with hypothetical paradise
(VI). If there were a state of existence like that of earth, but
without the change that death brings, there could be no
cycle of desire and fulfillment, no consummation, and such
an existence would be one of eternal ennui. Its characteristic
would be stasis rather than change. Death is the mother of
beauty then, because in the fire of her bosom which consumes,
is contained the principle of change which creates, as earthly
mothers create life. In death, therefore, we may figure ("de-
vice") a return to the creative principle in life ("earthly
mothers").

The argument, having established that earth is "all of para-
dise that we shall know," returns to the supposition raised in
section III (ll. 12-15) as to the consequence if this were
true. Granted that earth is the only possible equivalent of
paradise, the source of happiness for men would be the sense
of sharing a common fate of "men that perish," but who live
in that fellowship in harmony with the physical world as a
substitute for heaven. Section VII is a celebration of that
condition, in which a ring of men chant to the sun of the
particulars of the physical world, in an expression of their
harmony with it. Again in answer to section III, "Shall our
blood fail? Or shall it come to be/ The blood of paradise?"
their chant is a "chant of paradise./ Out of their blood,
returning to the sky," signifying harmonious union with the
physical world as if it were divine, just as "our blood, com-
mingle, virginal,/ With heaven," once united with divinity
in Christ. In the same way they chant to the sun, "Not as a
god, but as a god might be," the idea of divinity merged in
the reality of the physical world as a source of creation. The
men celebrate a transitory world, and know their kinship with
the "summer mom" that will pass away; and their destiny is
signified by the ephemeral dew on their feet: "Men do not
either come from any direction or disappear in any direction.
Life is as meaningless as dew" (Stevens, LWS, p. 250).

The woman bears, in that revery or suspension of time and
space which began with the pacification and stillness of the
"wide water" in section I, the cry that Christ did not rise as
god, but was mortal and is dead (VIII). The poem concludes
therefore with a description of a secular world, a
"chaos" beyond rational order, "unsponsored, free" of the
supernatural dominion of Jesus, an island inescapably sepa-
rated by the "wide water" of time and space from the cruci-
fiction. As in section II, the only possible felicity lies in re-
sponse to the physical world. The poem ends with a notation
of the sensuous detail of that physical world which must take
the place of paradise. The last of these notations, the pigeons,
suggests a state of existence which, like that described in the
poem, is isolated from the supernatural ("isolation of the
sky"), and ambiguous in the meaning of its destiny as are the
undulations in the course of the pigeons as they sink to dark-
ness, but with wings extended, as if in knowing acquiescence
to that destiny.

"Bantams in Pine-Woods" (CP, p. 75)

This poem concerns a challenge flung from the personal
imagination to the world of reality. The imaginative world of
the individual is placed in opposition to the overbearing real-
ity of the universe. The universal reality is metaphorically
described as a "ten-foot poet," a universal imagination as
against the imagination of individuals ("inhalings"). Stevens
sometimes figures nature as a cosmic imagination within
which the individual imagination operates (for example, "The
World as Meditation," CP, p. 521, ll. 10-11). In this par-
ticular case the individual imagination triumphs in imposing