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The Structure and Poetry of E. E. Cummings

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is similar to art in many respects. An interesting aspect of poetry is the textual and visual impact that E.E. Cummings has created with his inspiring individuality. As a result there have been many forms of criticism and analysis that have evolved over the years regarding his writing technique. This article examines some interesting features of E. E. Cummings' poetry.

Keywords: Literary criticism, poetic visualization, poetic inquiry.

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1.0 Introduction

The poetry of E.E. Cummings has long been noted for its simplistic, nontraditional and eccentric art form additionally, Cummings' experimentation with grammatical and linguistic rules cased his poems to become very popular among his readers. Having penned over 2900 poems this paper barely scratches the surface but provides novel insights into a few of Cummings' more inscriptive poems.

2.0 Methodology

This paper examines the structure of poems as well as the contextual interpretation of E.E. Cummings through poetic inquiry, or a method that seeks to reveal and communicate truths through intuitive and creative expression.

3.0 Discussion

The following introductory forward was prepared for Cummings' book, is 5, (Cummings ix):

Forward

On the assumption that my technique is either complicated or original or both, the publishers have politely requested me to write an introduction to this book.

At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question and Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz.

"Would you hit a woman with a child?--No, I'd hit her with a brick."

Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement. If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little--somebody who is obsessed by Making. Like all obsessions, the Making obsession has disadvantages; for instance, my only interest in making money would be to make it. Fortunately, however, I should prefer to make almost anything else, including locomotives and roses.

It is with roses and locomotives (not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls) that my "poems" are competing. They are also competing with each other, with elephants, and with El Greco. Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in a purely irresistible truth (to be found, in abbreviated costume, upon the title page of the present volume).

Admittedly, we may go away from Cummings' explanation knowing no more than what we knew before reading it other than we now begin to understand the artist that coexists within the poet.

The purpose of this essay is not to attempt to reveal the secrets behind Cummings' form, technique, or unconventional use of capitalization but to quite possibly develop an increased understanding of the relatedness of poetry as a form of art beyond that which we understand as our innate limitations of human understanding. Marshall McLuhan, a guru in media culture, author of the book *The Medium is the Message* argues, "If the content is obliterated by the channel, "what" we say is of little importance-only "how" we chose to deliver it" (McLuhan 1).

Similarly, when we read Cummings' poems, we are able to see much more than the linear compilation of language in any specific structure, rhyme, or form; what we are able to see is purely individual and creative in which we just may take a few moments to view the art before attempting to read the poem. In an imaginary interview, Cummings (1965) wrote;

Why do you paint?

For exactly the same reason I breathe.

That's not an answer.

There isn't any answer.

How long hasn't there been any answer?

As long as I can remember.

And how long have you written?

As long as I can remember.

I mean poetry.

So do I.

Tell me, doesn't your painting interfere with your writing?

Quite the contrary: they love each other dearly.

They're very different.

Very: one is painting and one is writing.

But your poems are rather hard to understand, whereas your paintings are so easy.

Easy?

Of course--you paint flowers and girls and sunsets; things that everybody understands.

I never met him.

Who?

Everybody.

Did you ever hear of nonrepresentational painting?

I am.

Pardon me?

I am a painter, and painting is nonrepresentational.

Not all painting.

No: house painting is representational.

And what does a housepainter represent?

Ten dollars an hour.

In other words, you don't want to be serious--

It takes two to be serious.

Well let me see...oh yes, one more question: where will you live after this war is over?

In China; as usual.

China?

Of course.

Whereabouts in China?

Where a painter is a poet.

Again, we may not be any closer to fully understanding Cummings' art form that we were in the beginning, however, we do understand the need to remain open minded to a form of art that just happens to be labeled as a poem.

I Carry Your Heart with Me

i carry your heart with me i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart) i am never without it (anywhere i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling)

i fear

no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true) and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows (here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide) and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

As an inaugural attempt to begin a discourse into Cummings' poetry, I will begin by looking at a poem that is fairly straight-forward (to some extent). In the poem I Carry Your Heart with Me, Cummings' it initially appears to provide an exception to Cummings' artistic ability to utilize poetic lineation to convey visual meaning. Similarly, Cummings' use of parentheses, I believe is an attempt to incorporate a second dimension of thought or metadata within the poetic structure. Much like a journal that is kept by writers that contain their thoughts, I believe that Cummings is incorporating his thoughts within the textual form of the poem. Lines 1 and 2 are such an example in that "i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart)" serves as a reinforcement of the love that exists between the two. Not only does the subject 'carry the heart' of the other, it is held "in' the subject's heart as well to further develop the feeling of oneness. Lines 2 through 4 also develop the oneness feelings because "i am never without it (anywhere / i go you go, my dear, and whatever is done / by only me is your doing, my darling)" once again exemplifies the oneness the subject feels with the other to the extent that the subject may even perceive an unnatural or overbearing control that the other maintains over him.

The second stanza opens with the inordinate spacing before "i fear". I think that this visual break in form illustrates the pause one may take prior to speaking – similar to taking a deep breath before talking; or the type of pause one would take when looking for the 'just the right' words. The subject states "i fear / no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet)" once again professing the love and continuing on to conclude that "whatever a sun will always sing is you" meaning that the other is the meaning behind all that exists for the subject.

The third stanza begins "here is the deepest secret nobody knows" then through three parenthetical lines describing the deepness of the secret that love ensues through an eternal universe. In essence, this poem demonstrates an unending love similar to Cummings' From Spiraling Ecstatically This (Powers, 1991).

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Buffalo Bill's
Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a water smooth-sliver
stallion
and break one two three four five pigeons just like that
Jesus
he was a handsome man
and what i want to know is
how do you like your blue eyed boy
Mister Death
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A second poem that has received a good deal of literary criticism is Cummings' Buffalo Bill's (Dilworth 174). This poem demonstrates more poetic lineation than the previous poem and departs from a somewhat loving genre and demonstrates a more insensitive side of Cummings. The opening line "defunct" creates a feeling that Cummings is expressing distain for Buffalo Bill. According to Dilworth (1995), the use of the word 'defunct' produces a somewhat sarcastic expressive ending toward the death of Buffalo Bill, insinuating a notion of indifference. The next four lines describe Buffalo Bill's horse as "a water smooth-silver / stallion" relating to the riding stunts that Buffalo Bill was noted for in addition to the shooting stunts as describes by "and break one two three four five pigeons just like that" representing the clay pigeons that would be shot at and broken will little effort, yet having a profound visual effect on the audiences "just like that".

Dilworth (1995) states "The reduction of 'Jesus' to an expletive ensures that the contrast between life and death is not complicated by the possibility of an afterlife" (175). I, however tend to disagree with

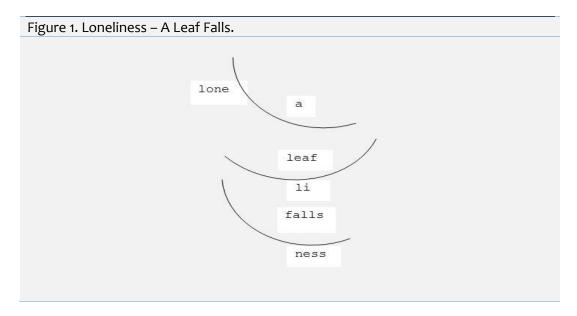
this analysis because the reference to Jesus, to me represents the general contrast between life (Jesus) and death (Mister Death). In other words, in life "he was a handsome man" but everything passes and Cummings rhetorically asks the Devil (Mister Death) "how do you like you your blue-eyed boy" indicating a final distain for the life Buffalo Bill.

Loneliness

l(a
le af fa | | s)
one | iness

This final poem illustrates Cummings' artistic use of visual imagery and poetic lineation in this minimalist articulation and conception of loneliness. The syllabic triple beat of the word 'loneliness' as juxtaposed to the term "(a/le/af/fa/ll/s)" creates a literal meaning within the notion of being alone. The subtle imagery of a leaf falling to the ground, the loneliness that accompanies it as it sways to and fro never fully eradicating the earth's gravitational pull to finally rest in its new location.

Additionally, distraction and the rhythm of the falling leaf interrupts the subject's thoughts of loneliness and the subject's consciousness and falling leaf are a simultaneous experience. Figure 1 illustrates the juxtaposition of consciousness and awareness of the falling leaf that the subject experiences.



Note: The metaphorical notion of the leaf falling could be compared to a long life that ends. As humans we fall way from our supporting structures (society) and as we 'fall' our journey through old age succumbs to the inevitability of our propensity as humans to embrace and accept our eventual destiny.

This poem, as one of my favorites, demonstrates the ability of Cummings to provide readers with as opportunity to discover within themselves the nature of perception between structure, prose, and imagery.

This limited illustration of Cummings' structure and poetry is not meant to provide an all-inclusive representation of his form. However, the three selections do present the reader with an understanding of the artistic creativity through which Cummings was able to portray within our limited human communicatory frameworks that we call language.

The structure and form in Cummings' work is unprecedented and yet may provide further insight to those interested in the pop culturist era of the collective unconscious of a generation lost.

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