



Journal of Arts & Humanities

The Structure and Poetry of E. E. Cummings

Michael Pickett

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.

Available Online: 4th December, 2015.

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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)

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 disdain for the life Buffalo Bill.

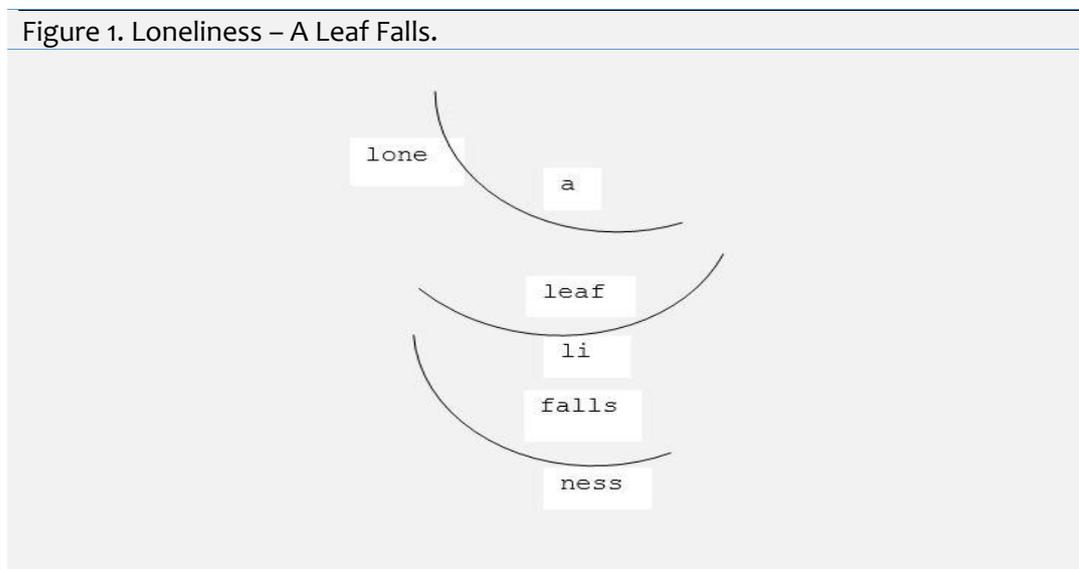
Loneliness

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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.

Figure 1. Loneliness – A Leaf Falls.



Note: The metaphorical notion of the leaf falling could be compared to a long life that ends. As humans we fall away 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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