

ARRAY OF SUBJECTS IN THE POEMS OF E.E. CUMMING (FLOWERS, INSECTS, BIRDS, MICE, ACROBATS, PATRIOTISM, WAR)

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Abstract

Barry Marks states that a poem is not an idea but a carefully shaped experience in which the reader may discover something about life, the author and himself.¹ Indeed his array of subjects ranging from flowers and grasshopper .to patriotism and war is so extensive that it startles the casual reader. irrespective of whether his theme is about a bird or a mouse or a man, he endows all of them with the **dignity** that is a characteristic of an individualist. In his **view**, they are all. in harmony with nature's scheme of life and therefore, they are important and individualistic components of life.

Keywords: patriotism, Barry Marks states, casual reader, dignity, harmony, obvious

"So far as Cummings is concerned, any perceivable incident or scene is poetic grist."

Robert E. Wegner, The poetry and prose of E.E. Cummings, p.40.

The poems to be analysed in this chapter have been chosen to represent the wide variety of Cummings' themes within the limitations of time and space available. It will however, be obvious at the end of this chapter that an undercurrent of love and concern for the individual runs through all these poems.

The poem "un(bee)mo" is a beautifully crafted poem with two strands, which are visually balanced The poem is as follows:

un(bee)mo
vi
n(in)g
are(th e)you(o nly)
asi(rose)eep"

[C.P, p.33]

One of the two strands in this poem is within the parantheses and the other is outside. Within the brackets, we have "(bee in the only rose)" and outside we find "

unmoving you are asleep". In this poem, Cummings uses the technique of fusion along with the parentheses to suggest the image of the petals of a rose with a bee sleeping among the petals.

While fusing **the two strands**, the poet appears to be combining subjectivity with objectivity too. If we remember that the bee is usually very active, we realize that Cummings may be suggesting that the bee has lost its individuality by falling asleep. Thus by implication, Cummings proceeds from the objective description of the flower and the bee to the subjective interpretation about the loss of individuality. The poet also invites the reader to solve the ambiguity of the word only. Is it the only rose left or is it the only rose with a bee in it?

Cummings' poem on the grasshopper has elicited both favourable and unfavourable criticism. Charles Norman's comment on this poem is probably the best introduction to it. He says:

"It was logical for him, when he came to
write a poem about a grasshopper, to make
it hop; it hops out of the first line
grass end first:::"²

The poem is given below:

"r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
who
a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
PPEGORHRASS
eringint(o-aThe):l
e A :p:
S(r rlvlnG
'gRrEaPsPhOs)
to
rea(be)rran(com)gi{e)ngly
,grasshopper;

[C P, p. 396]

A reader, who is unfamiliar with Cummings' technique, is bound to be puzzled by the poem. The poem is in exploded verse with three cryptogrammatic rearrangements of the word grasshopper to represent the backward, forward and sideways movement of the insect. With this key, the poem may be paraphrased in the following words: "grasshopper, who as we look up now, gathering into itself. the grasshopper leaps arriving rearrangingly to become grasshopper, " David Burns is of the view that the grasshopper leaps about the page becoming the very essence of grasshopperness.³ The unique nature of the grasshopper is its ability to gather itself and jump in any direction. Cummings has captured this ability of the insect, which endows it with

individualism and portrayed it happeningly in the poem. Kidder points out that the *I* in leaps in the seventh line of the poem has been separated to suggest the digit X as in the poem about the falling leaf. ⁴ The digit one strengthens the idea of the grasshoppers individuality.

Cummings recognized individualism not only in men and women but in birds too, as can be seen in his poem "for any ruffian of the sky". The poem has been quoted below:

"for any ruffian of the sky
your kingbird doesn't give a dam---
his royal warcry is I AM
and he's the soul of chivalry
in terror of whose furious beak
(as sweetly singing creatures know)

cringes the hugest heartless hawk
and veers the vast most cratty crow

your kingbird doesn't give a damn
for murderers of high estate
whose mongrel creed is Might Makes Right
— his royal warcry is I AM

true to his mate his chicks his friends
he loves because he cannot tear
(you see it in the way he stands
and looks and leaps upon the air)"

[C P, p. 774]

The four sections of the poem bring out the regal and individualistic nature of the bird. of particular significance is the bird's war-cry, which to the poet sounds like the words I AM. The poet uses capitals to convey to the reader the emphatic nature of the warcry. The implication is that the bird is conscious of its existence in the present and of the immediacy of life.

In the second section, the reader is told that even the cruel hawk and the crow, which is bigger in size than the kingbird, give it a wide berth. The next section informs the reader that the warcry or the kingbird is in strong contrast to those of the other birds, which adopt the creed of low breed dogs namely, "Might Makes Right." The last section tells us that the kingbird is faithful to his mate, chicks and friends. The two lines describe the unique and vibrant actions of the bird but the second line of the last section/ reveals the secret underlying the birds individuality. The bird is unique, because its love springs from its courage. Wegner makes the following comment about this poem:

"... None of them (individuals) are solipsists or nihilists by any definition

of these words Rather like the
kingbird, as Cummings tells us in Poem
2 of 73 Poems, they know their worth
in relation to those whom they love....”⁵

In another poem, Cummings uses the flight of a bird against the sun to illustrate the concept of motion upon motionlessness, which in turn forms the theme of the poem.

The poem is as follows:

"swi(
across gold's rouNdly
)ftblac kl(ness)y
a-motion-upo-nmotion
Less?
thE
(against
is
)Swi
raming
(w-a)s
blr
d.

[C P, p. 429]

When the words of the poem are rearranged in the conventional order we get: "swift blackly across gold's roundlyness — the swimming bird is (no) was against (it) — (like) a motion upon motionlessness? In this poem the poet takes the role of a commentator and gives the reader a running commentary of the flight of a bird, which is silhouetted blackly against the golden orb of the sun for a fleeting moment. The verbs is and was have been used to the momentary nature of the experience. The question mark after Less in the seventh line reminds us that the sun is not really motionless and that the poet is describing a very minute duration during which the swiftly moving bird is seen blackly against the imperceptibly moving sun.

The technique used by Cummings to achieve this effect is known as tmesis. According to Mick Gidley, tmesis is the separation of parts of words by intervening words, which is sometimes used with a pictorial element as an additional pleasure.⁶ It is this technique, which provides the pictorial quality as well as the feeling of immediacy is the poem that has been analysed above. The feeling of immediacy is an important component of individualism.

Compassion — which is one form of love and a characteristic of individualism — is the theme of a poem, which is introduced through the poet's thoughts about a poisoned mouse. The poem is given below

"Me up at does
 Out of the floor
 quietly Stare
 a poisoned mouse
 still who alive
 is asking What
 have i done that
 You wouldn't have"

[C P, p.184]

The poem is about the conflict between man and nature, which is represented by the mouse. Conflict is a part of nature and usually in such conflicts — as in the case of natural disasters — nature is victorious. However, when nature is man's victim, Cummings feels that he violates the harmony in nature of which man himself is a part.

The poem may be rewritten in the conventional manner as follows: "A poisoned mouse, who is still alive and does quietly stare out of the floor at me (who am) up is asking, "What have I done that you wouldn't have?" Through the fractured syntax, the poet tries to communicate the different aspects of the scene, which the protagonist notices. They are not in logical sequence but in chronological sequence beginning with the shock of seeing the dying mouse's stare and ending with the protagonist imagining the mouse's reproachful question. It will be seen from this poem that Cummings gives the reader a new insight into the common practice of poisoning mice, which are considered to be pests.

In the circus, Cummings found an image, which was congruent with his concept of an individualist, when he saw the trapeze artists. Their act required great skill and great concentration during every moment and they were in great danger during every minute of every performance. He saw a parallel to the immediacy of life with that of their act and used it as the theme of his poem. "mortals)", which has been quoted below:

"mortals)
 climbi
 ng i
 nto eachness begi
 n
 dizzily
 swingthings
 of speeds of
 trapeze gush somersaults
 open ing
 hes shes

&meet&

Swoop

fully is are ex

quisite theys of return andfall which now drop who all dreamlike (im

[C P, p. 536.]

Cummings has fractured the word immortal into im, which comes at the end of the poem and mortal which comes at the end. According to Eve Triem, from the final line to the first this is a "circular poem".⁷ When the trapeze artistes begin their act, they separate from the mass of spectators and others and as ordinary mortals begin to climb the rope ladder to commence their act. Cummings tries to help the reader to visualize the rope ladder by arranging the ns in the third, fourth and fifth lines vertically. They ascend into eachness. Eve Triem is of the opinion that eachness is a critical word and adds that George Haines has pointed out that the separation of climbi and begi from the end letters ng and n emphasize the individuality of the performers.⁸ Then at that height, which makes both the performers and the spectators dizzy, they become swinqthings of speed and extensions of the trapeze.

There at that great height, they merge with the act gushing and somersaulting at such great speed that they become indistinguishable hes shes; and yet they maintain perfect balance as visually suggested by &meet&. The of and the symbol & in the eighth and twelfth lines respectively provide visual balance suggesting that perfect balance is essential for the act. A perceptive reader will be able to realize that Cummings is trying to point out that the ability to balance various factors is important in life too. The thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth lines provide a visual reinforcement to the description of the movements of the acrobats that they communicate. They swoop with graceful precision, until they merge their identities in the exquisite nature of their performance, Cummings then portrays the acrobats dropping one by one; after making a half turn at the end of the act by the single word turn followed by the vertical arrangement a/n/d of the word and. The last line (im informs us that the mortals who went up the ladder become immortals through the precision of their movements, which make their performance unique. The poet recognizes in the performance of the acrobats the creation of that dreamlike quality through specific skills, which makes the performance remembered even after the performers are gone. Eve Triem states, "The poet justifies the contention that precision makes motion, which makes life and that the dark beginnings are his luminous ends."⁹

Cummings loved America but his love for his country was a discerning love. He was patriotic but did not like the mostpeople brand of patriotism, which was merely expression of meaningless platitudes. A poem in which he criticizes this attitude is "next to of course god america," which has been given on the next

page:

"next to of course god america
 love you land of the pilgrims" and so forth oh
 say can you see by the dawn's early my country
 'tis of centuries come and go
 and are no more what of it we should worry
 in every language even deaf and dumb
 thy sons acclaim thy glorious name by gory
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
 why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful
 than these heroic happy dead
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
 they did not stop to think they died instead
 then shall the voice of liberty be mute?

He spoke: And drank rapidly a glass of water [CP, p. 268]

This poem, which begins with a platitude is replete with them. The protagonist is so carried away by his own eloquence that he does not realize that he is mouthing second hand sentiments. He does not have first hand experience of the actualities of war, hence his words do not come from his heart. He is merely repeating cliches connected with war that he has heard. The man is more concerned with his momentary importance than with the well-being of his country. The only action that the man is able to do is to drink a glass of water to moisten his parched throat.

Lines eleven and twelve contain mostpeople's concept of war. Many writers have criticized this romantic but highly unrealistic understanding of war. Bernard Shaw has debunked this concept in his play. "Arms and the Man," It is significant that Cummings and Shaw were contemporaries and both were highly individualistic in their approach to certain aspects of life.

"my sweet old etcetera," is another poem on the theme of patriotism in which Cummings satirizes the romantic ideas, which mostpeople have of the actual conditions on the battle-field. He reinforces the idea by placing the actualities of war in stark contrast to the well meaning but ineffectual war efforts of Isabel and aunt Lucy's platitudes about patriotism. The poem is as follows:

"my sweet old etcetera
 aunt lucy during the recent
 war and what
 is more did tell you just
 what everybody was fighting
 for

my sister
 isabel created hundreds
 (and
 hundreds)of socks not to
 mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers
 etcetera wrists etcetera, my
 mother hoped that
 i would die etcetera
 bravely of course my father used
 to become hoarse talking about how it was
 a priviledge and if only he
 could meanwhile my
 self etcetera lay quietly
 in the mud et
 cetera
 (dreaming,
 et
 cetera, of
 Your smile
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera

[C P, p. 276]

In the first of the nine sections of the poem, we are introduced to aunt Lucy. The words convey the fact that she is a sweet old lady, but the etcetera in the first line warns us that the speaker does not really mean what he is saying. The term etcetera is repeated eight times in the poem and each time it reminds us that the protagonist is underlining the irony behind the words; The way in which this term is used in the poem reminds of the way in which Shakespeare uses the word honourable in Mark Antony oration over the dead-body of Caesar. Commenting on the use of etcetera Fred Shroeder writes:

"The first use of 'etcetera' is in the order of sophomoric sophistication -- that is my sweet old etcetera / aunt lucy implies a commonplace level of irony: "aunt lucy is sweet, but hers is a standardized conventional sweetness."¹⁰

In the second, third and fourth sections, the protagonist tells us that aunt Lucy and her sister feel that their war-effort — knitting large quantities of socks and stitching shirts and flea-proof ear-warmers for the soldiers on the battlefield is a very important task; However, Shroeder points out that the etceteras in the fifth section reminds that these ladies know very little about the real conditions on the battle-field. He writes:

"The next incomplete thoughts — those having to do with knotted things for doughboys — do not imply much an adolescent superciliousness. Now the irony is somewhat grimmer, for "sister Isabel" may feel herself an important contributor for the war effort, but her "flea-proof earwarmers" are truly inconsequential"¹¹

The sixth section portrays a mother and father who hope that their son would die bravely but the etcetera in the section reminds us that the parents of the soldier are merely mouthing platitudes and conventional notions about war and patriotism. The father in particular reminds us of the speaker in "next to of course god america i", who becomes hoarse talking about patriotism. In this poem, the father stops to drink a glass of water. Against these romantic notions of war, the poet presents the grim reality of the actual situation on the battle-front, where the soldier lies in the mud. His thoughts are not about honour and glory but about the woman he loves and her smile, her eyes, her knees and her Etcetera. The reader cannot fail to notice the capital E in this etcetera, which is both the last word and the last etcetera in the poem. Shroeder's opinion about this ending is as follows;

"your smile / eyes" — and then at the end indicates his real un-Romantic direction with "knees". in short, what Cummings has done is to carry his readers with him in an ironic discovering of the patriotic fallacy, and then to puncture each of his readers by forcing them into admitting their own aesthetic fallacy — thereby introducing double irony"¹²

In short, the interpretation that the reader gives for the last Etcetera will depend on his mentality. The poem tells us that the relatives think that they know what the soldier needs and experiences on the battlefield but those who know the soldier's real condition know that he requires the love of a woman and not socks or shirts or earwarmers. He does not think of honour and glory but of the loved ones at home.¹³

Cummings detested war and found modern warfare to be particularly abominable. Because it denies man honour, self respect and dignity, which are important qualities for an individualist. The terrible conditions in which the modern soldier has to fight forms the theme of his poem. "lis / -ten":

"lis
-ten

you know what i mean when
 the first guy drops you know
 everybody feels sick; or
 when they throw in a few gas
 and the oh baby shrapnel
 or my feet getting dim reezing or
 up to your you know what in water or
 with the bugs crawling right all up
 all everywhere over you all me everyone
 that's been there knows what
 i mean a god damned lot of
 people don't and never
 never
 will know,
 they don't want
 to.
 No

[C P, p. 272]

Cummings tells the reader what happens on the battietront when the guns are firing. The poet splits the word listen into lis and ten: Cummings' technique of fracturing helps him in this poem to obtain an onomatopoeic effect, which suggests the hiss of the flying shrapnel through the first part namely lis. The second part--ten -- makes a double suggestion: First, it suggests the finality of the impact of the shrapnel in the flesh of a soldier and also suggests the fact that each squad is is made up of ten men.

The poet then gives us a graphic description of the sick feeling that the others get, when the first soldier drops dead or when the enemy uses mustard gas, which was used in both the world wars. Then, with the shrapnel flying all around them, the men have to wade in water, which is freezing, full of bugs and comes up to their unmentionables causing them acute suffering:

Cummings uses this poem to drive home the fact that many people all over the world and in the United States in particular are not aware of the horrible realities of war. What is worse, "they don't and never will know (because) they don't want to (know) – no."

Cummings hated war, because it was a threat to individualism and was an evil system. He was sad that the warnings of all the great philosophers, teachers and even the great American general, who lived in our times — General Sherman — have gone unheeded;. Cummings used this idea as the theme of the poem given on the next page which begins with words, "plato told;"

"plato told
 him:he couldn't

believe it(jesus
 told him; he
 wouldn' t believe
 it)lao
 tsze
 certainly told him# and general (yes
 mam)
 sherman
 and even
 (believe it
 or
 not)you
 told him: i told
 him: we told him
 (he didn't believe it, no
 sir)it took
 a nipponized bit of
 the old sixth
 avenue
 el; in the top of his head; to tell
 him"

[C P, p.553]

When paraphrased the poem becomes: "Plato told him but he couldn't believe it. Jesus told but him but he souldn't believe it. Lao Tsze certainly told him and General- - yes ma'mn (no less a person than General) --- Sherman and (believe it or not, even you told him I told him. (In fact) we (all) (all) told him (that war was evil) (but) he dinn't believe it – no sir. It took a nipponized bit of the Old sixth avenue el(evator) in the top of his tell him (so)."

Cummings focuses the reader's attention on modern man's indifference to the horrors of war, though he has been reminded about it from time to time. The word him in the poem refers to the modern man. Cummings tells us that modern man is impervious to the words of the great individualists mentioned in the poem- All of them right down to the American General - General Sherman have warned him of the futility of war and the importance of love Yet modern man is unable to understand the wisdom in these words until he is hit by a flying shrapnel from a Japanese bomb during the Second World war. Using poetic licence, Cummings makes it seem that the shrapnel was made out of the iron obtained from the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway, which was dismantled and sold as scrap to Nippon, which is commonly known as Japan. There is no definite proof for this, though it is true that the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway was dismantled in 1939.¹⁴

Norman Friedman feels that Cummings has sharp things to say about the Anglo Saxon's arrogance in condescending to sell scrap iron to his Oriental enemy Japan.¹⁴ Wegner offers the following comments

"... the individuals of the world have tried
 without success to convince man that he may

know others by knowing himself. Unfortunately
man is a slow learner as Cummings
observed in the poem from " I X I "
"plato told" ¹⁶

Wegner has also pointed out that the pronouns You and I in the poem, which represent the individuals of the world, who feel the truth inductively.¹⁷ Cummings felt that modern warfare denies man honour and dignity.

Ten poems on seven themes have been analysed in this paper. In these poems Cummings presents several aspects of the American landscape, life and attitudes of the American people to patriotism and war. Each of the poems is presented from the point of view of his individualistic perception using his highly individualistic technique. It will also be noticed that irrespective of the theme, Cummings' approach to the theme is built around: individualism, harmony with nature's scheme of life, correlation of various aspects of life and love and a deep and genuine concern for the individual, whether it is a flower, an insect, a bird, an animal or man.

The fifth and last chapter of this dissertation is the summation. The last chapter also advances a few suggestions regarding areas in Cummings' poems on which further research can be taken up.

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