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E.E. Cummings: The Impact of Unusual Form and Style on a Poem

Whether his style could be termed “innovative” or simply “bizarre,” E.E. Cummings produced highly unusual poems that were characterized by unconventional punctuation, word positioning and capitalization. Yet some of his poems exhibit these attributes to a greater extent than others. For example, “when serpents bargain for the right to squirm” is relatively “normal,” while “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” is anything but usual. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effect that Cummings’ unusual writing style has on the work and its reader.

The first feature of “when serpents bargain for the right to squirm” that a reader notices is probably the lack of capitalization and punctuation. By omitting these, Cummings has made his lines flow together without any breaks other than those created by the reader. In essence, the reader is made to be interactive with the poem by determining himself where sentences begin and end. In addition to engaging the reader in this way, the mere fact that every sentence in the poem is absurd commands attention and piques the reader’s interest in what the conclusion will be. The recurring theme of nature (serpents, sun, thorns, rainbows, thrushes, screech-owls, waves, ocean, oaks, valleys, mountains, and seasons) lends a timeless aspect to the poem since these absurdities in nature will undoubtedly always be absurd. This theme also provides unity to the work and leads well into the concluding freak of nature: the idea that mankind should be trusted and believed in.

Several repeated themes exist in “somewhere I have never travelled” as well. The reader is reminded multiple times of the frailty of the author’s love interest. She is described as “frail,” “fragile,” and having “small hands.” The author appears to be drawn to the

helplessness of this woman in addition to her other attractive features. Nature is again mentioned several times (rose, spring, snow, rain, etc.), though rather than being the subject matter it is employed as a way of conveying the author's thoughts. In describing how the woman affects him by her presence, the author speaks of the opening of a rose's petals in Spring. Alternatively, if she wants him closed, he will quickly shut as a rose does at the onset of snow. The rose is again used to explain the depth of her eyes, the voice of which commands him to be happy and sad, "open" and "closed." These themes effectively create pictures in our mind as the woman is compared to the seasons and the author to a rose. The feelings the author feels for his love interest are conveyed in a way that all can understand – behaviors in nature. In addition to being a useful analogy, this use of nature could be intended to show that his feelings when near the woman are completely instinctive as is the rose's reaction to the season. The theme of nature and the woman's fragility are both introduced early in the passage, repeated later, and provide the concluding subject matter: "nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands." Finally, the effect of the missing spaces after commas in lines 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, and 20 often serves to connect two ideas in a closer way than could be accomplished otherwise. In some cases it brings similar ideas together ("me,i," "nobody,not") and in others it connects descriptive words to each other or the object ("skillfully,mysteriously)her," "beautifully,suddenly,").

Unlike the previously mentioned poems, "in Just-" features not only unconventional capitalization and spacing, but also unusual word positioning. The entire work is broken up by large spaces that, like the lack of punctuation and capitalization, force the reader to interact with the poem in order to understand it properly. The jamming of names together (eddieandbill, bettyandisbel) not only requires a little extra mental activity to read, but also

dictates the tempo of those words, implying that they should be read faster than the others. The main idea of the poem is of a wet, lazy spring afternoon where children run in the mud and a balloonman comes by to sell balloons to them. The unusual portrayal of mud being luscious and puddles being wonderful conjures up images of a bright sunny afternoon after a rain. The poem effectively creates a warm, relaxing image and has an attractive, alluring, almost surreal quality to it.

By far the strangest poem of the four, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-a-g-r” (“grasshopper”) is at first glance comprised of random letters and symbols. Yet with some effort, the reader can make out “grasshopper, who, as we look, now upgathering into himself, leaps, arriving to become, rearrangingly, a grasshopper,” or something similar. Clearly the purpose of this poem is not as much to be read as it is to be deciphered and, in a sense, experienced. In one sense, the organization of the words on the page resembles the movement of a grasshopper: non-linear, unpredictable, apparently random. The letters of the words themselves are likewise arranged unpredictably and thus add to this “grasshopper” effect. The sentence, when translated, also bears a resemblance to the movement of a grasshopper – it is choppy, broken, and reads almost as if a grasshopper were speaking it between leaps. Whether E.E. Cummings intended for the poem to have a significant “meaning” is doubtful as the translated content is mostly nonsense. Yet it is innovative in the way it involves the reader and conveys a theme on a variety of levels – visual, audible, organizational. Additionally, the recurrence of various forms of the word “grasshopper” throughout the poem serves, to a certain extent, to unify the whole – a feature present in other works by Cummings as well.

Though highly unusual and not particularly valuable in its subject matter, E.E. Cummings’ poetry is worth reading if for no other reason than to experience it once. Though

they initially may look like text copied right out of an internet chat conversation, certain aspects of the poems deserve a closer look. Whether discovering the hidden complexity of “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” or the unusual analogies involving nature, readers of E.E. Cummings’ poetry must be engaged in order to understand his writing, the style of which contains qualities that must be studied in order to be recognized.