

Review

Poetic Style of E.E. Cummings: Discerning Meaning through Language

Dr. Sukanya Saha

Asst. Prof. English, Dept. of English, Vidhyasagar Women's College, Chengalpet

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Literature is a form of self-expression. Writers from all over the world and ages have been expressing themselves in different genres throughout. Each writer exhibits his own style which is reflected in his choice of words, structures or themes. Writer's style becomes the hallmark of his personality and he is recognised or stands apart from his contemporaries or predecessors on the characteristic features of his works which are essentially his own. The uniqueness with which he gives a form to his literature earns him his worldwide reputation and thus sets up an example or model for others. Needless to say this also gives birth to perennial research and discussion.

E.E. Cummings was one such writer. His poetry has intrigued his reader having a distinct treatment which he gives to his thoughts. Cummings made a mark in the history of English literature. John Logan in *Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism* called him "one of the greatest lyric poets in our language."¹ Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote in *Standards: A Chronicle of Books for Our Time*: "Cummings has written at least a dozen poems that seem to me matchless. Three are among the great love poems of our time or any time."² Malcolm Cowley admitted in the *Yale Review* that Cummings "suffers from comparison with those [poets] who built on a larger scale—Eliot, Aiken, Crane, Auden among others—but still he is unsurpassed in his special field, one of the masters."³ Jenny Penberthy in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* considers Cummings "Among the most innovative of twentieth-century poets."⁴

E. E. Cummings experimented with multiple aspects of poetry and moulded its language to create his own unique style. A Cummings poem typically looks like words scattered on the page. Cummings formed his own words, changed the existing English words and gave them a new meaning. His deviation from the traditionally accepted poetic norms made him popular with many readers as he stood out from his peers. "No one else," Randall Jarrell claimed in his *The Third Book of Criticism*, "has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive to the general and the special reader"⁵.

The following discussion is an attempt to view and highlight the characteristic features of Cummings's poetry. His style, for which he was recognised, is reflected in his manner of presentation of innermost feelings. His poetry is governed by passion and equally passionate he appears when he fashions his poetry in an unprecedented manner. The present article is an attempt to study some of the prominent features of his poetry. The focus is on the language of Cummings, and the poetic licences which he has enjoyed in expressing his thinking.

Key Words: E. E. Cummings, poetic experimentation, poetic style, sentence structures, lexis

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INTRODUCTION

Among all the literary genres known to mankind, poetry enjoys the status of most preferred and personalized medium of expression. Conversely humans of all ages across the world have shown inclination towards it as a form which satisfies their intellectual appetite. In order to express or stress upon certain emotion or thought, writers often resort to linguistic experimentation. Twentieth century literature is replete with evidences of writers' poetic licenses. Syntax, lexis and punctuation are often found to be deviant from the accepted norms. This not only enhances the desired effect aimed by the writer but also leaves ample scope for perineal research into interpretation of superficial and implied aspects of the literary work.

EE Cummings was an American poet. He is an eminent voice of 20th century English literature owing to his experimentation with syntax, punctuation and graphology. He places his words on paper in a unique fashion which demands a fresh approach from the readers as it appeals more visually than verbally.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATIONS

Any discussion on Cummings poetry is far from being exhaustive. The theories in modern criticism highlight the importance of the work, independent of any preconceived notions derived from author, background or any other such phenomena. Hence, Cummings' poetry also calls for a fresh approach. His poetry is replete with wonders which challenge reader to derive their own meaning not feeling dictated by Cummings in any way. Selected poems by Cummings become the subject of discussion here which exemplify how his poetry can be viewed from a linguist's viewpoint and if done so, how it would reveal a new interpretation.

The visual treat which his poem *I have Found What are You Like* is the first example in such an attempt. Cummings mastery lies in his unique presentation of ideas on paper. His poetry catches attention due to presentation as well as themes and imagery.

*i have found what you are like
the rain,*

*(Who feathers frightened fields
with the superior dust-of-sleep. wields*

*easily the pale club of the wind
and swirled justly souls of flower strike*

the air in utterable coolness

deeds of green thrilling light

with thinned

new fragile yellows

lurch and press

—in the woods

which

stutter

and

sing

*And the coolness of your smile is
stirring of birds between my arms; but
i should rather than anything
have (almost when hugeness will shut
quietly) almost,*

your kiss

What most strikes is Cummings' pauses. Pauses indicate holding back and waiting for a deeper thought to unfold (pause markings mine):

*"i have found what you are like (pause)/the
rain,(pause)/ (Who feathers frightened
fields/with the superior dust-of-sleep. ...".*

A sudden halt in the flow of words is intentional and it successfully retains the surprise yet to be disclosed. A rapid flow of thought in the opening line "I have found what you are like" is punctuated with a small phrase "the rain" indicates that Cummings ponders for a while over the aptness of the metaphor, rain. It might also indicate that he stops to wait for an idea to cross his mind, which he can put to use to express his beloved, i.e. her physical being.

Cummings starts his poem with first person "I", evidently giving the poem autobiographical implications. Interestingly, the pronoun "I" is in lower case, through which perhaps poet wants to divert the reader's attention towards the description of his beloved and limit his own presence.

The opening sentence, "I have found what you are like..." is structurally complete, having a verb and direct object (what you are like). However, the following phrase, 'the rain' and a dependent clause 'Who feathers frightened fields/with the superior dust-of-sleep...' hinder the structural perfection of the successive structures. Understandably these structures are representative of the ceaseless flow of thoughts in the poet's mind. Similarly, the parenthesis which starts here doesn't close anywhere in the poem, indicating the unending details he wishes to add in his beloved's description. The dependent clause, enclosed in

parenthesis, starts with a capital letter 'W' and immediately captures reader's attention as Cummings commences developing the metaphor of rain and attributing it unique characteristics.

The alliterative phrases 'feathers frightened fields', 'superior dust-of-sleep' echo soft sounds like /f/ and /s/, adding to the gentle flavour which Cummings imparts to the portrayal of his beloved. Rain gently wakes the fields.

Adjectival phrases in the poem are some unusual collocations and reveal Cummings' urge to articulate his thoughts. There are examples of personification (*frightened fields*), oxymoron (*pale club*). Some more such instances are, 'utterable coolness', 'green thrilling light' and 'new fragile yellows'. There are words which have been formed by conjoining two or more words as, the verb 'and press' and noun 'stirring of birds'. Both these indicate poet's urgency to utter certain feelings. These lexical coinages aptly project the poet's raw emotions striving to come on the fore.

The beautiful cascade like fall of words at the twelfth line depict a delicate feeling which poet has as he imagines the closeness with his beloved.

The graphic astonishments which reader experiences in Cummings' poetry are far for being expressive. Cummings was outstanding for his unique arrangement of words and the ease with which he penned his thoughts left behind all previously thought about lexical experimentation. Cummings does not believe in constraining his thoughts and emotions to take a shape of well-formed words or sentences in articulation. Reading and appreciation of his poems needs a fresh approach which is open to expression of free flow of thoughts and throws all traditional norms of syntax and lexis overboard. While reading Cummings one gets a feeling that if such a style can be accepted as literature then anything is possible in literature which is a genuine expression, no matter what shape it takes. Following are few more selections from his poetry which attract attention for startling structures and words:

I Will Be

i will be
M o ving in the Street of her

bodyfee 1 ingaroundMe the traffic of
lovely;muscles-sinke x p i r i n g S
uddeni

Y totouch
thecurvedship of
Her-

...kiss her:hands
will play on,mE as
dea d tunes OR s-crap p-y lea Vesflutterin g
from Hideous trees or

Maybe Mandolins
1 oo k-
pigeons fly ingand

whee(:are,SpRiN,k,LiNg an in-stant with
sunLight
then!)-
ing all go BlacKwh-eel-ing

oh
ver
mYveRylitTle

street
where
you will come,

attwi li ght
s(oon& there's
a m oo
)n.

The appearance of the poem suggests as if Cummings crushes the lyrics and scatters the crumbs over the page. It also gives an impression of taking 'dream language' like qualities which is devoid of any regular structure and outline. The metaphor of 'movement on street' vividly describes poet's carnal desires as he imagines being with his beloved. In order to understand the meaning hidden in these fragmented structures, a persevering reconstruction is required. This meticulous effort on the part of the reader lends the beauty to Cummings' poetry and grades it exceptional. The intermittent capital letter accentuate the emotion of the expression. For example in 'M o ving', 'bodyfee 1 ingaround Me', 'her: hands/will play on,mE as/ dea d tunes OR s-crap p-y lea Vesflutterin g/ from Hideous trees...' the capitalized letter highlight 'me' and the sensations which body experiences.

Another such noteworthy poem as Cummings' graphical marvel is the following:

*The Sky Was
the*

sky
was
can dy lu
minous
edible
s pry
pinks shy
lemons
greens coo 1 choc
olate
s.
un der,

a lo
co
mo
tive s pout
ing
vi
o
lets

The splash of colours brighten then the canvas which paints the image of sky. The sensory images in Cummings' poetry lend a distinct charm to it being hearty and is reciprocal. Cummings does not hold back his emotions or take time in pondering over them to enclose them in some accepted form. Following are few lines taken from his different poems. The selections intend to point out Cummings' imagery and tropes. His lexical coinages are also noteworthy in these lines (bods mine).

1.
i will wade out
till my thighs are steeped in burning flowers
I will take the sun in my mouth
and leap into the ripe air

2.
who knows if the moon's
a baloon, coming out of a keen city
in the sky—filled with pretty people?

3.
my love is building a building
around you, a frail slippery
house, a strong fragile house
(beginning at the singular beginning

of your smile)a skilful uncouth
prison, a precise clumsy
prison(building that and this into Thus,
Around the reckless magic of your mouth)

4.
listen
beloved
i dreamed
it appeared that you thought to
escape me and became a great
lily atilt on
insolent
waters but i was aware of
fragrance and i came riding upon
a horse of porphyry ...
i dreamed in my dream you had
desire to thwart me and became
a little bird and hid
in a tree of tall marble...
i came
riding upon a scarlet sunset

trampling the night easily...
...beloved i dreamed
i thought you would have deceived
me and became a star in the kingdom
of heaven...
...i came riding
upon a thousand crimson years arched with agony...
...i picked you
as an apple is picked by the little peasants for their girls

Cummings' modifiers such as, '*burning flowers*', '*ripe ail*', '*insolent waters*', '*crimson years*' are expressive of restlessness or anguish during emotional turbulences pertaining to different situations being dealt with in these poems. The oxymoron in '*strong fragile*', '*skilful uncouth*' and '*precise clumsy*' bring out the agitation poet experiences as he fears the desertion from his beloved and wishes to imprison her forever through his love. Poet's emotional outburst is a reaction which result in contradictory terms appear collocating with each other. The imagery in '*sun in my mouth*', '*i came riding upon a horse of porphyry*', '*became a little bird and hid in a tree of tall marble*' has an unusual quality about it. Poet's vigour to conquer the sun and blaze, his riding of a horse made of porphyry, a tree made of marble are the products of fanciful imagination. The tenderness of emotions is expressed through the simile, 'i picked you as an apple is picked by the little peasants for their girls'. The assonance in 'arched' and 'agony' voice the distress which poet experience in search of his beloved.

The syntax in Cummings' poetry varies according to his flow of thoughts, emotions or sensations. Cummings does not maintain a consistent pattern of syntactic structures in his poems throughout. His sentences range from mere fragments to long drawn sentences with multiple ideas woven together. The following lines provide a good example to this observation, where Cummings commences expressing his feelings in short sentences but as he progresses his emotions swarm in jostling for space and finding no end as Cummings leaves out the full stop to bestowing ceaselessness to them:

*i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric farrand what-is-it comes*

*over parting flesh....And eyes big love-crumbs,
and possibly i like the thrill
of under me you so quite new*

Significantly the verb phrase 'I like' has been repeated eight times during the course of total fourteen lines of the poem making it a mouthpiece of his pleasures. Halfway through the poem, he gives up the bindings of organised articulation and enjoys the freedom of spontaneous expression. A long series of verb clauses capture the flow of emotions punctuated by commas.

Cummings personifies inanimate objects, abstractions and writes as he converses with, or about them in a very convincing manner. Cummings endows them with emotions like love, fear or sorrow(bolds mine):

1. *Humanityi love you
because you would rather black the boots of
success...*
2. *if I should sleep with a lady called death...*
3. *even a pencil has fear to...
...a pen is dreadfully afraid
of her...*

4. *suppose
Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head.
young death sits in a café
smiling, a piece of money held between
his thumb and first finger...*

5. *little tree
little silent Christmas tree
you are so little
you are more like a flower
who found you in the green forest
and were you very sorry to come away?
seei will comfort you
because you smell so sweetly
i will kiss your cool bark
and hug you safe and tight
just as your mother would,
only don't be afraid...*

Cummings' maxims have a charm of their own. They are the extracts of his philosophy of life. Following are some such titles of his poems which are a short and pithy statements communicating a reality or rule of conduct:

1. *Let's live suddenly without thinking.*
2. *Nobody loses all the time.*
3. *The mind is its own beautiful prisoner.*
4. *This is the garden: colours come and go.*

The titles of Cummings' poems are interesting to observe. They can roughly be divided into three types:

One word	Sentence fragments	Complete sentences
Ta	There is a	I walked the boulevard
Who	Take for example this	Goodby Betty, don't remember me
Being	Ladies and gentlemen this little girl	You asked me to come: it was raining a little
Listen	Even a pencil has fear to	I'll tell you a dream i had once i was away up in the sky Blue, everything
One!	Kitty". sixteen,5' 11",white,prostitute.	A wind has blown the rain away and blown
Suppose	The moon is hiding in	The bed is not very big
If	When my love comes to see me it's	All in green went my love riding
		My girl's tall with hard long eyes
	Notice the convulsed orange inch of moon	It is funny, you will be dead some day
	My mind is	
	The Sky Was	
	I will be	

This table records some of his titles and is not all inclusive. The one word titles listed here are such words which do not give away the theme in the beginning which Cummings wishes to share. Similarly, the sentence fragments catch attention and build the suspense yet to be revealed. Cummings' titles with full sentences are innovative as rarely we find such full sentences as titles in poetry.

CONCLUSIONS

A fresh approach to literature not only contributes to the better understanding of itbut also holds up many other facets of the work which otherwise go unnoticed. Linguistic interpretation of literary texts take cues from

the texts itself without resorting to any other source of information. Understanding the author's presentation, his style, theme becomes much easier if a close attention is paid to the texts themselves. EE Cummings' poetry poses a challenge which is enjoyable, since it is not made up of complex ideas. Simple themes from life and emotions constitute the body of his poetry and he has been very genuine in putting them on paper. The above analysis is an attempt to understand liberties which he enjoys to voice his feelings. Cummings' poetry is a fascinating study from many aspects. There are numerous such poetic features which would reveal themselves with a deeper probe.

REFERENCES

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