

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOVE AND NATURE IN CUMMINGS' POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

E.E. Cummings' concentration on love and nature during the 1940's and 1950's represents his philosophy of life in evaluating whatever is human. His celebration of the individual human identity is part of his belief in what American Transcendentalists believed in. In addition, Cummings attempts to reassure the identity which violence destroyed through his concept of self-reliance.

The paper aims to offer a thorough analysis of Cumming' doctrine which is to trust the heart and live by love in a chaotic world. This marks his deviation from his generation, the Lost Generation, who are involved in adventures to reflect their denial of the age. This paper explores love as an illuminating power that lifts man into a harmonious whole. It is for Cummings an agent of reconciliation between the individual and society.

**Keywords:** E.E. Cummings, individuality, lost generation, love, nature, Transcendentalism.

### **Introduction**

Two factors affected Cummings' change of tone from bitter satire to concentration on love and nature in the volumes he wrote during the 1940's and 1950's.<sup>1</sup> His happy life with his third wife Marion Morehouse: the fashion model, who lived with him from 1934 to the end of his life; and his frequent visits to "Joy Farm," his summer home absorbing the benevolence of the natural landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Cummings' philosophy of life is represented in his evaluation of whatever is instinctively human, promoting emotions, imagination and the spiritual side, and casting off whatever is artificial. Thus, his concentration on love and nature in his later volumes as a reaction to his "disillusioned spirit." He says:

my doubly disillusioned spirit made an awe –  
 inspiring discovery ... which ... has prevented  
 me from wholly misunderstanding so called  
 humanity the discovery, namely, that all groups  
 ... are fundamentally alike; what makes any  
 world go round is ...individuality .<sup>3</sup>

Cummings' celebration of the individual human identity is part of his belief in what the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman) believed in. The optimistic faith in the visionary powers of the individual's mind enables him to see life from within. This concept of self – reliance is Cummings' reaction against New England Puritanism. It is an attempt to reassure the identity which mass violence destroyed.

Love constitutes the core of Cummings' doctrine of individuality, being an artist who is "a feeling illimitable individual; whose happiness is to transcend himself," as he describes himself.<sup>4</sup> To trust the heart and live by love in a disturbed world is what he emphasizes. It distinguishes him from American and oriental Transcendentalists who believed in the individual's inner light as a means for illumination. It also marks his deviation from his generation, the Lost Generation, who are involved in promiscuous adventures to reflect the spirit of denial of their age.

His strong belief in the transcendental power of love comes early in his life with the strong love between his parents.<sup>5</sup> It illuminated his vision of the world. He says in I : Six Nonlectures:

As it was my ... fortune to have a true father and  
 a true mother, and a home which the truth of  
 their love made joyous, so – in reaching  
 outward from this love and this joy – I was ...  
 lucky to touch and seize a rising and striving  
 world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity  
 of life herself; a vivid and violent world  
 welcoming every challenge; a world worth  
 hating and adoring and fighting and forgiving;  
 ... a world which was a world ...I see people who've  
 been endowed with legs crawling on their chins

after ... ' security' ... something negative ... an  
 avarice ... and ...cowardice. Who would be  
 secure? Every and any slave. No free spirit ever  
 dreamed of ' security.'<sup>6</sup>

Love's illuminating power is compared to a bright eternal sun in "love is more thicker than forget," a poem in 50 Poems (1940). It is higher than any sky for it enables man to see what is beyond the ordinary world:

it is most sane and sunly  
 and more it cannot die  
 than all the sky which only  
 is higher than the sky  
 (ll. 13 – 16 )<sup>7</sup>

It is the "only god," sacred and merciful that contains all and brings happiness to man. Its transcendental power is compared to a measureless star, as he says in another poem " love is the every only god":

love is the every only god  
 who spoke this earth so glad and big  
 even a thing all small and sad  
 man, may his mighty briefness dig  
 .....  
 so truly perfectly the skies  
 by merciful love whispered were  
 completes its brightness with your eyes  
  
 any illimitable star  
 (ll. 1– 12)

The essence of love lies in its power to make the lover grow, develop, and ultimately feel alive. In his "Introduction" to New Poems Cummings describes the lover as:

a healthy complex, a ... citizen of immortality ...  
 he is democracy, he is alive: he is ourselves.  
 Miracles are to love. ... they are by somebody  
 who can love and who shall be continually  
 reborn, a human being ... innocent,  
 spontaneous, true ... measureless... never  
 to have: only to grow<sup>8</sup>

In "if everything happens that can't be done," a poem in IXI (1944), Cummings describes himself and his wife as happy, knowledgeable lovers who are alive:

we're anything brighter than even the sun  
 ( we're everything greater  
 than books  
 night mean)  
 .....  
 alive we're alive)

(ll. 37 –44)

They are alive because love lifts them into a harmonious whole, a complete existence, which asserts their individuality: "we're wonderful one times one"(l. 45) .<sup>9</sup>

In another poem Cummings focuses on the individuality of the lover, the "I," the whole, which cannot be two "halves," "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one," says he.<sup>10</sup> This is because the lover realizes his potentialities, feels one with his powers which turn him to be alive, a "productive personality."  
 11

The soul of the lover as a whole stands in opposition to that of "people so called " (most people) who stand as " parts, "even if multiplied cannot equal one , i.e. the wholeness of the lovers , as he describes them in " these people so called were not given hearts," 50 Poems . They are split into halves because they "package" themselves with their "commodities," an exchange of values which divided and crushed their personalities by turning them into abstracts .<sup>12</sup>

The aliveness which the lover feels turns him into a true individual with perfect selfhood: "Now, finally and first, I was myself," says Cummings.<sup>13</sup> He can grasp the truth that lies beyond the ordinary

world which cannot be grasped intuitively. The truth which the poet is keen to reveal lies in recognizing the evil that lies in the state of negation, not – being, which "most people" create and enforce as they attempt to put a broken world back without love.

Cummings' love poems aim at bringing "a revolution in consciousness, " to awaken people from the nightmare world of unreality and make them live in the world of feeling.<sup>14</sup> George Haines in": : : 1: The world and E.E. Cummings " comments on this, saying:

From Cummings' perspective the 'socially –minded'  
are the servants, deceivers ... of mechanics and  
collectivities of worldly power. The world of ... mass  
production ... and mass murder ... This is the nightmare  
world of unreality. Against such power the individual  
can only protest by living in the world of I feel.  
Reality and life ... blossom out of innocence ... out of  
creative imagination ... out of love .<sup>15</sup>

But love for Cummings is not only a form of protest, rather it is an agent of reconciliation between the ideal world and the real world. That is, between the individual and society. Cummings pictures the individual as ever at war with society though he realizes that his fulfillment can only be achieved in society. Hence when the individual experiences love and reaches the moment of discovery, the two realms will be reconciled into "homogeneous duality." <sup>16</sup> Here lies the potential power of love as "the mystery–of mysteries who creates ...all," as Cummings describes it in i : Six Nonlectures.<sup>17</sup>

Through love Cummings reaches "moments of affirmation" which transcend his early passive awareness of the sterile contemporary world.<sup>18</sup> It is the " yes, " the giving not the have which he looks for, In "nothing false and possible is love, " l\_x\_l , he says:

nothing false and possible is love  
(who's imagined , therefore limitless )  
love's to giving as to keeping's give ;  
as yes is to if , love is to yes

(ll. 1-4)

In "true lovers in each happening of their hearts" Cummings affirms that love is the truth which stands against the false and defies eternally the changes of time:

true lovers in each happening of their hearts  
 live longer than all which and every who;  
 despite what fear denies ,what hope asserts,  
 what falsest both disprove by proving true

.....

such a forever is love's any now

.....

ever more true would truest lovers grow

(ll. 1-11)

Love is the source of unity to "all" the universe: "my and your / are birds our all " (ll. 5-6), this is what "non sun blob," in l x l says. It turns everything happy, as the so soaring flight of the birds suggests. Moreover, love is the source of spiritual reawakening. With the declining light of the day, everything moves to "here," to "unearth," (l. 12) to darkness. Life collapses, but the physical death is accompanied by spiritual development. This is seen in the image of "leaf of ghosts." The ghosts are the spirits, the souls which try to open up a new vision of the world by the power of love .<sup>19</sup>

But aside from lovers, who could appreciate the superior qualities of love? Cummings finds no one in his contemporary world. In "any one lived in a pretty how town," 50 Poems, he tells the story of a person named "anyone" who loves a woman named "noone." She cares about him "laughed his joy and cried his grief" (l.14). They live in a town whose men and women are caught up in their busy lives. They are indifferent to these lovers and, moreover, they despise their individuality. The towns- people are described as "little" because they live in a state of negation of love which turns their life dull: "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same"(l. 7). Even when "anyone" and "noone" die they bury them side by side and go on in their mechanical way of living, only the children can recognize their love.

The lovers are indulged in spiritual humility which helps them to feel alive, accepting life as it is: singing when fail and dancing when succeed; while the town folk strive to be " someones" and "everyones," losing their souls in their preoccupation with worldly measures. The antithesis of these two truths marks the irony of life: love and "unlove" do exist in tension and remain in a state of " impossible equilibrium."<sup>20</sup> This

juxtaposition underlies the paradox of existence.

As for the children, they forget the meaning of love "down they forgot as up they grew"(l. 10). Thus, they lost their sensitivity, their capacity to be alive because they became part of the mechanized world of "most people," the world of "isn't." This is indicated by the bells which mark the death of their innocence "how children are apt to forget to remember / with up so floating many beds down"(ll. 23 – 24). Also, they mark the death of "anyone" and "noone," but with a great difference. The children are moving from life to death while "anyone" and "noone" are moving from death to life.

The idea of death is extremely important. It marks Cummings' mature outlook. He distinguishes between dying and death. The lovers are capable of dying which he considers "natural," a process leading to rebirth and fulfillment.<sup>21</sup> Hence he uses the present tense to indicate the eternal now the lovers experience in death as a sign of their being alive. Death for the old Cummings is part of man's life which he should be aware of and accepts. It is the 'yes' which he looks for:

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

(ll. 29-32)

On the other hand, stands the "most people" who are incapable of dying. They live in a state of death in life which the poet considers "evil," "artificial" and "scientific."<sup>22</sup> Their life ends as it begins: they "reaped their sowing and went their came" (l.35) an echo of an early line "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same." It is all mechanical and negative.<sup>23</sup>

From what has been said it is obvious that Cummings recognizes love as a higher power than nature. Nature becomes only secondary, a- means for an end. But in his meditative later poetry he wonders at nature's marvels and writes of a self that merges with nature which reveals his harmonious self. His vision of nature owes a great deal to the romantic tradition as a protest against man-made institutions.

His childhood and adult experiences in Norton's Woods in Cambridge and Joy Farm in New Hampshire underlie his faith in nature. In Six Nonlectures Cummings speaks about nature's impact on him as a child, saying:

Here, as a very little child, I first encountered that  
 mystery who is Nature; here my enormous  
 smallness entered Her illimitable being; and  
 here someone actually infinite or impossibly  
 alive –someone who might almost ... have been  
 myself –wonderingly wandered the mortally  
 immortal complexities of Her beyond imagining  
 imagination .<sup>24</sup>

Cummings' concern for whatever is alive and growing explains his celebration of nature. His identification with nature offers a revelation, an awareness that there is more in nature than one sees. It is the way to self –transcendence. To transcend the social self and acquire the natural one , the child –like selflessness , as Buddhists call it .<sup>25</sup> This transcendence takes place when man reaches complete submission of his self –consciousness (the state of annihilation ) as he is harmoniously united with nature .<sup>26</sup> He then lives in the timeless world of the here and now, denying the past and the future to crystallize a moment of heightened awareness .<sup>27</sup> This world is the true world of the deeper self-opposite to the ordinary world which is the artificial one. Moreover, Cummings' new complexity of vision which underlies his mystical insight is no longer a question of false routine world in opposition to an actual one, it is a vision of a poet who feels the weight of mortality and the nearness of death.<sup>28</sup>

In "i thank You God for most this amazing," Xaipe (1950) <sup>29</sup> Cummings writes a simple religious poem. It is " a statement of faith, " as Rushworth M. Kidder describes it.<sup>30</sup> He thanks God for whatever is natural, infinite, and affirmative. He says:

i thank You God for most this amazing  
 day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
 and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
 which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(ll. 1-4)

Cummings praises nature's power that makes him feel a real human being:



(i who have died am alive again today ,  
 .....  
 how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
 breathing any –lifted from the no  
 of all nothing –human merely being  
 doubt unimaginable You ?

(ll. 5-12)

Nature awakens him to see the truth which lies beyond the worldly half –sight, "now the ears of my ears awake and / now the eyes of my eyes opened" ( ll. 13 -14 ).

In the last poem of the same volume "luminous tendril of celestial wish" he sees nature's mystery in its being a source for illimitable beginning. He praises its child-like spontaneity, innocence, and immediacy. Unfortunately, such features are refuted by a world which he describes as dull and cowardly:

Sweet innocence refuted ) clumsy some  
 dull cowardice called a world vanishes ,  
 teach disappearing also me the keen  
 illimitable secret of begin .

(ll. 11-14)

In the first poem of his last published volume, 95 Poems (1958), "I (a." <sup>31</sup> which looks like this:

I (a

le

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II

s)

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I

iness

Cummings draws his poem instead of writing lines of verse. It is like a code that needs deciphering. A purely visual poem written in the way haiku is written.<sup>32</sup> This is part of the influence of Buddhism on Cummings. Simply the poem says that the feeling of loneliness is like a falling leaf.

The sense of individuality is seen in the word "one" and the repetition of "I." The singularity of the leaf parallels the notion of "oneliness." It functions as an objective correlative to the feeling of alienation and loneliness which is seen in its separation from the tree.<sup>33</sup>

Typical of haiku, the interanimation of the self with nature is seen in the juxtaposition of the subjective ( the growing awareness of loneliness ) with the objective ( the falling of the leaf ). These two incidents take place simultaneously. It is a fusion of opposites: the down versus up, the sound of the falling leaf versus the silence of loneliness, the human with nature. It is a picture of reconciliation to bring a sense of wholeness and solidarity through which the self realizes itself as "one."<sup>34</sup>

Through the combination of an abstract idea of loneliness with a concrete image of the leaf Cummings means to assert two ideas. Firstly, he wants to show that man's feeling of loneliness in a society of artificial values gives him pain and permits him to wither and fall as a leaf. Secondly Cummings exceeds the assertion of loneliness to show us the transcendence through nature which is marked by self – knowledge and awareness. The process is difficult. It requires humility from man. This explains the slow–motion of the falling of the leaf which is indicated by the spacing and the incomplete lines.

Though the leaf falls but it twists with grace which the poet's vertical way of writing shows.<sup>35</sup> Such way of falling indicates the serenity with which the poem ends, a healthy silence.<sup>36</sup> This silence which he describes as " a less erring end " in Is 5 ,<sup>37</sup> is the stillness , the state of nothingness, which man gets as he becomes close to nature. It is the center of Buddhist enlightenment which a world of half –sight cannot see.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the mature Cummings finds the way to render the unspeakable into the visible. He also changes the sad autumnal mode into happy spring, i.e. the falling leaf into self – knowledge. It is the high level which a man in a healthy state of mind can achieve.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Cummings' central motif is the immeasurable state of being: the life of feeling which he expresses with a child's sense. He looks with increasing serenity at a better world which is born (not made) by

individuals. A world of intuition as opposed to the world of "security" against which he is protesting. His protest is clearly seen in his technical innovations which are reflected in the unusual means of expressing the fragmented world around in the sensitive and tender expression of his love and nature poems . All rise from the same root: love for life and the individual. He protests against the sell outs of the spirit and the various degradation of the dignity of human character, loathing all regulating of the person by mass pressures, which makes the individual less a person , leading a monotonous death in life . He looks for the indivisible man "one's not half two." In his protest he proves to be the man who " dares to call himself a man " in a world which he sees only "a leak." A world of moral corruption which kills the emotional awareness by which man is kept alive.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>During the 1940's and 1950's Cummings wrote less satire. See 50Poems, 3 , 6 ,8 , 11 ,13 – 14 , 24 -25 , 28 – 29 , 40 ; IXI , i-xvi ; Xaipe, 37-40,42-47,49.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Everett,"E.E.Cumming's Life," project Modern American Poetry. Http: // www. English . uiuc. Edu / maps / poets / cummings / cummings . htm.

<sup>3</sup>e.e. cummings , i : Six Nonlectures , (Massachusetts : Harvest University press , 1969 ) , p.31,

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.33

<sup>5</sup>In Six Nonlectures Cummings describes their love, saying "my father and my mother loved each other more than themselves..."my mother...will be a heaven of black red roses, my father will be (deep like a rose/ tall like a rose." See, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.43

<sup>7</sup>All line references to Cummings' poems (except 95 Poems and 73 Poems are taken from E.E.Cummings Poems: 1923-1954(New York: Harcourt Brace& World, Inc., 1968).

<sup>8</sup>pp.331-332.

<sup>9</sup>The title of this volume IXI of which this poem is one, could stand as a symbol for Cummings' literary achievement. That is, satire, love, and nature represent a harmonious whole since the aim of satire is to show his hatred to the absence of love.

<sup>10</sup>IXI, XVI.

<sup>11</sup>Lloyd Frankenberg, "Cummings Times One" in E.E. Cummings and the Critics, ed., S.V. Baum (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. I64.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.163.

<sup>13</sup>Six Nonlectures, p.53.

<sup>14</sup>Norman Friedman, ed. "Introduction" to E.E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays, New – Jersey : Prentice – Hall , Inc. , 1972,p.6.

<sup>15</sup>p. 28.

<sup>16</sup>Patricia Buchanan, " The Whole of E.E Cummings " in E.E.Cummings: A collection of critical Essays, p.61.

<sup>17</sup>Six Nonlectures, p.43.

<sup>18</sup>Norman Friedman, "Introduction," e.e. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964),pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup>Marks, Barry A. " Four Poems " E.E. Cummings. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964,p.30.

<sup>20</sup>Lewis Turco, " Corn and Creativity: The Paradoxes of E.E. Cummings," Spring 3 (1994):76.

<sup>21</sup>"dying is fire) but Death," Xaipe, 6, l.14.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., ll. 17 -19.

<sup>23</sup>For more of Cummings' love Poems, see 50 Poems, 34; 1 X 1, XXXIII, XLIV, LI.

<sup>24</sup>Six Nonlectures, p.32.

<sup>25</sup>L.S. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (California: California University Press, 1966), p.119.

<sup>26</sup>Pushpa N. Parekh, " Nature in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings, " Spring 3 (1994): 67.

<sup>27</sup>Michael Dylan Welch, " The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings, " Spring 4 ( 1995 ) : 105.

<sup>28</sup>Friedman, The Growth of a writer, p.162.

<sup>29</sup>Xaipe is a Greek word which means "greetings" or "rejoice." To rejoice with Cummings is to rejoice in an incomplete world. See Friedman, The Growth of a Writer, p.152.

<sup>30</sup>Rushworth M. Killer, E.E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry . (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 240.

<sup>31</sup>This poem is quoted by Marks, "Four Poems" in E.E. Cummings, p.21.

<sup>32</sup>The Haiku are short poems of Japanese origin. They link the external world (nature) with the internal one (human nature), using common language. They record the essence of a moment keenly perceived with child –like immediacy, spontaneity, and egolessness, which is the center of Buddhism, depending mainly on the juxtaposition of two images . They are suggestive poems which try to engage the reader through implication , that is why they look incomplete on first reading , but they are rich in meaning. Their Central moods are sweet solitary melancholy ( *sabi* ) and the mystery of the unknown (*yugen* ). The essence of haiku is a return to human nature, the realm of the subconscious, nakedness, honesty, and worldless world that is not for "most people." See Welch, "The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E Cummings," pp.16, 97-98, 118.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.116.

<sup>34</sup>J.E. Turbulence, "Cummings' 'l (a': Solitude, Solidarity, Wholeness," Spring II (2002): 100.

<sup>35</sup>Marks, " Four Poems " in E.E Cummings , p .25 .

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.26.

<sup>37</sup>IS 5, "Four," VIII.

<sup>38</sup>About the idea of silence in Cummings' later poetry, see Xaipe: "purer than purest pure "; 95 Poems: " birds ," " this man's heart ," "silence "; 73 poems: " wild ( at out first ) beas ts uttered human words, " "all worlds have half sightseeing either with."

<sup>39</sup>For more nature poems , see l X l ,XLl – LIV ; Xaipe , 1,3,5,10-11, 22-23 ,35-36, 41,51-54, 60 ; 95 poems ; 73 poems.

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