i was sitting in mcsorley's Study Guide

i was sitting in mcsorley's by E. E. Cummings

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Introduction

Cummings first published "i was sitting in mcsorley's" in his collection *Tulips & Chimneys,* which appeared in 1923. It has also been anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry.* Different versions of the poem have been printed over time.

The poem is set in McSorley's Ale House, where cummings frequently drank. It is a New York City saloon on East Seventh between Second and Third Avenues. Known as a favorite haunt of bohemians and artists, McSorley's opened in 1854, and both Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy are said to have visited the saloon. In the poem, the speaker, alternately meditative and descriptive, depicts his experience inside the saloon in typical cummings fashion, using nouns as verbs and vice versa, coining portmanteau words (words whose form and meaning are derived from a blending of two or more distinct forms), twisting syntax, and fragmenting words. The poem visually resembles prose, with its division into twelve paragraph-like sections.

Like many of the other poems in *Tulips & Chimneys,* "i was sitting in mcsorley's" embodies the opposition between the organic, natural world, and human society, what cummings refers to as "manunkind." Cummings's description of the bar is thick with sensuous and concrete images and effectively conjures the feel, smell, and sight of a saloon. The descriptions themselves also mimic the often sloppy way the brain processes perceptions and produces language when affected by alcohol.

Cummings's love for the city and his revulsion of humanity are both evident here.

Author Biography

Born October 14, 1894, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just blocks away from Harvard Yard, Edward Estlin Cummings (known as e. e. cummings) grew up in a happy and intellectually stimulating household. His father, Edward Cummings, was a Harvard professor and, later, a Unitarian minister, who fostered a love for books and knowledge in his children. His mother, Rebecca Haswell Clarke, was descended from a long line ofNew England writers and intellectuals. One of them, Susanna Haswell Rowson, wrote *Charlotte Temple,* considered by many literary historians to be the first American novel.

As a child, cummings's artistic and literary interests were encouraged by his parents, and he determined early that he wanted to become a poet. After graduating fromCambridge Latin School, cummings entered Harvard, where he studied poetry and the visual arts and contributed poems to the *Harvard Advocate* and the *Harvard Monthly.* Cummings was also featured in the anthology *Eight Harvard Poets.* In 1915, he graduated with a degree in Greek and English literature and gave the commencement address. In that address, he applauded what he called "The New Art," which included cubism, futurism, impressionism, imagism, and postimpressionism.

After taking his masters degree in English from Harvard the following year, cummings, although an avowed pacifist, volunteered as a driver for the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps inFrance during World War I. Shortly after, French authorities imprisoned him for suspicion of espionage, citing letters he and his friend, William Slater Brown, had written home and cummings's outspoken criticism of France's handling of the war. Cummings describes this experience in his semi-fictional book *The Enormous Room,* often cited as a classic of American literature. This incident exemplifies cummings's disdain for bureaucracy and authority and underscores his passion for individual freedom, a concern that would help mold his writing, both thematically and stylistically, throughout his career. Cummings claimed that the goal of his writing was "unrealism," by which he meant the shattering of language's meaning-making conventions embodied in typography, grammar, and word form. He made this goal a principle of his writing and practiced that principle his entire career.

Cummings pursued his writing and painting enthusiastically after the war, returning to New York City and taking an apartment with Brown inGreenwich Village. Cummings wrote many of the poems collected in *Tulips & Chimneys* (1923), including "i was sitting in mcsorley's" during the few years after his return. In all, he published almost a dozen books, including *XLI Poems* (1925), the play *Him* (1927), and *Eimi* (1933). His poetry is gathered in *Complete Poems* (1972). He lived both in New York City and at his family's farm near Silver Lake in New Hampshire, where he spent the summers with Marion Morehouse, his common-law wife and companion for the last thirty years of his life. Cummings's awards include Guggenheim Fellowships, the Shelley Memorial Award, anAcademy of American Poets' Fellowship, and a National Book Award Special Citation for *Poems 1923-1954.* On September 3,1962, cummings died on Joy Farm inNorth Conway, New Hampshire.

Poem Text

I was sitting in mcsorley's. outside it was New York and beautifully snowing.

Inside snug and evil. the slobbering walls filthily push witless creases of screaming warmth chuck pillows are noise funnily swallows swallowing revolvingly pompous a the swallowed mottle with smooth or a but of rapidly goes gobs the and of flecks of and a chatter sobbings intersect with which distinct disks of graceful oath, upsoarings the break on ceiling-flatness

the Bar.tinking luscious jigs dint of ripe silver with warm-lyish wetflat splurging smells waltz the glush of squirting taps plus slush of foam knocked off and a faint piddle-of-drops she says I ploc spittle what the lands thaz me kid in no sir hopping sawdust you kiddo

he's a palping wreaths of badly Yep cigars who jim him why gluey grins topple together eyes pout gestures stickily point made glints squinting who's a wink bum-nothing and money fuzzily mouths take big wobbly foot

steps every goggle cent of it get out ears dribbles soft right old feller belch the chap hic summore eh chuckles skulch. . . .

and I was sitting in the din thinking drinking the ale, which never lets you grow old blinking at the low ceiling my being pleasantly was punctuated by the always retchings of a worthless lamp.

when With a minute terrif iceffort one dirty squeal of soiling light yanKing from bushy obscurity a bald greenish foetal head established It suddenly upon the huge neck around whose unwashed sonorous muscle the filth of a collar hung gently.

(spattered)by this instant of semiluminous nausea A vast wordless nondescript genie of trunk trickled firmly in to one exactly-mutilated ghost of a chair,

a;domeshaped interval of complete plasticity,shoulders, sprouted the extraordinary arms through an angle of ridiculous velocity commenting upon an unclean table.and, whose distended immense Both paws slowly loved a dinted mug

gone Darkness it was so near to me,i ask of shadow won't you have a drink?

(the eternal perpetual question)

Inside snugandevil.   i was sitting in mcsorley's It,did not answer.

outside.(it was New York and beautifully, snowing. . . .

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The first stanza of "i was sitting in mcsorley' s" introduces the setting of the poem and one of its themes: the distinction between the inside and outside worlds. These worlds are literally the inside and outside world of the bar and the city, but they are also the inside world of reflection□focusing on self and the outside world of perception□focusing on others.

Stanza 2

The speaker describes the saloon and its "slobbering walls" as "snug and evil." This seeming contradiction highlights the simultaneous attraction and repulsion the speaker holds for the place. Cummings's trademark disregard for conventional grammar and syntax are effective here, as they help to depict a bustling, chaotic, and dirty atmosphere that is nonetheless comfortable. Adjective and adverbs such as "slobbering," filthily," "pompous," and "witless" all contribute to this description.

Stanza 3

This stanza, the longest of the poem, mixes bits of dialogue into its description of the sights and sounds of the bar. "Kiddo," "Yep," and "no sir" are all words or phrases that one might expect to hear in a bar, especially in exchanges between bartender and customer. The filmic equivalent to this stanza would be a scene from a Robert Altman film, in which simultaneous dialogues are captured. The overlapping of sight, sound, and smell give the description immediacy and highlight the many individual dramas being played out in the bar. Phrases such as "a faint piddle-of-drops" also gives cummings's description an onomatopoeic quality, as the sound of the words mimic the action depicted.

Stanza 4

Cummings frequently breaks words in unexpected places. The first word of this stanza is "steps," finishing the word "footsteps," which ends the previous stanza. Using run-on lines in this manner emphasizes the seamlessness of the speaker's perception and the relentless quality of existence itself. By stringing together his perceptions and thoughts as they happen, the speaker functions as a kind of multisensory recording device. The description in this stanza suggests an older man ("old feller") who has had too much to drink, ordering "summore."

Stanza 5

This stanza is the most conventionally coherent one in the entire poem. The speaker focuses on himself, noting that he is just "sitting in the din thinking drinking." He highlights his own pleasant feelings, regardless of the seedy surroundings, which are embodied in the image of "the always retchings of a worthless lamp." His comment that "ale . . . / never lets you grow old" alludes to the pleasant, often self-deluding effects of alcohol on one's thinking.

Stanza 6

While contemplating his experience in McSor-ley's, the speaker's world is interrupted by the vision of a "bald greenish foetal head," around whose huge neck "a collar hung gently." This apparition could be some combination of dog and human, which symbolizes the degenerate atmosphere of the bar and the ways in which human beings lose dignity when alcohol takes over their bodies. But more likely he is describing a man and his dog in an impressionistic manner. Phrases such as "sonorous muscle" are examples of synesthesia, a technique in which one sense is used to describe a sensation related to another sense. In this case, the speaker describes something that he sees ("muscle") with an adjective related to sound ("sonorous"). As in previous stanzas, cummings uses modifiers such as "soiling" and "unwashed" to emphasize the extreme seediness of the place and the people who frequent it. Interestingly, the speaker never implicates himself in this seediness. Rather, he positions himself as a tourist or anthropologist who doesn't see himself as a part of the world he attempts to explain.

Stanza 7

The speaker's apparitions continue when, during an "instant of semilumionous nausea," he sees a "nondescript genie of trunk" plop himself down into a "ghost of a chair." The speaker's visions suggest that he has had too much to drink and that these beings he sees are symbolic projections of his own view of humanity. But these descriptions are also cubist-like renderings of simultaneous perceptions. Whereas cubism, an early twentieth-century art form, attempted to break objects down into their geometric shapes, cummings's version of literary cubism breaks words down and coined new ones to affect the structure of experience itself. Thus, the creatures that cummings describes in this poem may be separate, a man and a dog, for example, but he is combining the words used to represent them to probe a new way of expressing the simultaneity of his perceptions.

Stanza 8

Cummings continues his linguistic inventiveness in this stanza, describing an element of time (i.e., "interval") as a physical thing, calling it "dome-shaped." He references a

number of perceptions in this stanza: a waitress quickly cleaning a table, a dog, and a man affectionately holding his beer. But he rearranges the words used to describe these perceptions so it appears as if they are pieces of a dream.

Stanza 9

The speaker has achieved that drunken moment of self-reflection, asking an imagined self if it wouldn't share a drink with him.

Stanza 10

Appropriately enough, this stanza shadows the previous one. The "eternal perpetual question" is the one the speaker asks of the shadow. Cummings implicitly pokes fun at philosophical and unanswerable "eternal" questions such as, Is there a God? and What is the meaning of life?

Stanzas 11-12

These two stanzas repeat phrases and information from the beginning of the poem, giving the poem a circular shape and providing closure. That the shadow "did not answer" underscores the speaker's aloneness in the saloon, the sense of his separateness from all that surrounds him.

Themes

Language and Meaning

At the heart of "i was sitting in mcsorley's" is the question of language's capacity to sufficiently name the world. Cummings's associative imagery and unconventional syntax present not a literal picture of the world within McSorley's saloon, as much as it does the speaker's emotional and subjective response to that place. That response is depicted in a rush of concrete images that are not spatially ordered or tied to narrative. The effect of this kind of description is an impressionistic rendering of the saloon, where no clearly defined shapes come into focus. The blurry nature of the picture is illustrated in the first lines of the second stanza, when cummings writes "the slobbering walls filthily push witless creases of screaming warmth chuck pillows are noise funnily swallows." Such an impressionistic representation of the physical world suggests that the role of language is not simply to name what is out there but also to question what is out there. By calling attention to language's incapacity to provide an objective depiction of the world, cummings asks readers to think about their own relationship to words and the things they represent. Language is more a prism than a window, cummings's poem suggests, and once readers acknowledge their part within that prism, they can participate in the poet's vision of the world as he sees it.

Humanity and Human Nature

Cummings has long been known as a poet who loathed the masses but loved the individual. This view of people is strikingly evident throughout the poem, as he describes McSorley's as a kind of hell and its customers as demonic and disfigured creatures. He emphasizes the "evil" nature of the saloon in his descriptions of its "slobbering walls" and its "witless creases." The people in the saloon are described in similarly unattractive terms. He writes that one of them has "a bald greenish foetal head", and he describes someone else as "a vast wordless nondescript genie of trunk." The world outside the saloon, he describes as "New York and beautifully snowing," highlighting the contrast between the world of human beings and the world of nature. The speaker confirms his own self-loathing when he describes his vision of humanity inside the bar as "this instant of semiluminous nausea." The final image readers are left with is that of a bar full of emotionally and spiritually disfigured people who choose to be inside "snugandevil" and drinking, giving vent to their baser human emotions and qualities. The innocence and purity of nature, represented by falling snow, is an ironic reminder that goodness exists but that humanity doesn't necessarily have access to it.

Style

Typography

Cummings is perhaps best known for his innovative typography and for his experiments with grammar and word form. He routinely uses capital and lowercase letters in unconventional ways, he inserts parenthesis and scatters periods and commas in a seemingly random manner; he uses nouns as verbs and vice versa, and he splits and combines words in unexpected places and ways. All of these devices slow down the poem for readers, asking them to think associatively, as the speaker thinks, and to question the ways in which reality has been described to them. In spite of all this apparent randomness, in general, each of his "stanzas" can be read as separate syntactical units.

Expressionism

Although cummings was known for his innovative typography and grammatical innovations, he was essentially an expressionist. Expressionism emerged as a movement in painting in the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the 1920s. Expressionists attempted to pierce the world of illusion, the phenomenal world, to get at the truth lying beneath it. Expressionist poetry, like painting, uses symbols to express what is essentially un-sayable. These symbols yoke together opposites— the individual and the collective; the outside and the inside—in an attempt to reconcile contradictions and get at the truth. Expressionists are interested in translating their subjective feelings and perceptions rather than realistically describing the empirical world. Well-known expressionist writers include Franz Kafka, Max Beckmann, and, later in the century, Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

Historical Context

After he graduated from Harvard in 1916, cummings moved toNew York City, where he stayed, with time away during World War I, for most of his life. Cummings probably wrote "i was sitting in mcsorley's" around 1917, when he was living in Greenwich Village in New York City, part of that time with his friend William Slater Brown, whom he met during the war. Cummings's biographer Charles Norman notes that cummings frequented McSorley's, which he describes as follows:

It has two rooms, each with its individual admonitory sign, "Be Good or Be Gone." The walls are crowded with photographs and lithographs in which a vanished city dwells, and dead, buxom ladies and derbied men. The room in front has the bar, but the room in back boasts a famous lady of smooth and beautiful nudeness. . . . Here writers, artists, and laborers still meet on equal terms, without distractions, to sluice down amber quarts in the abiding gloom.

Cummings was a flaneur (an idle, man-about-town) of sorts, roaming the city for hours every day, sitting in coffee shops, bars, and restaurants, soaking up the voices and sights of New York City, and using them as fodder for his paintings and poems. The early part of the century was a lively and vibrant time inManhattan and across the country. Undergirded by a surge in industrial growth, the economy was booming, and politicians announced a New Era in world affairs. Consumerism was on the rise, as people were barraged with products they didn't even know they needed. Petroleum-based products such as rayon, acetate, and cellophane gave rise to entire new industries. Automobiles, radios, and telephones became must-have items. Americans were experiencing a sea change, or transformation, in the way that they lived. Anti-drinking activists lobbied hard for Prohibition, which took effect in 1920. The Eighteenth Amendment prohibited the manufacturing and selling of alcohol. In big cities such as New York, however, Prohibition fueled illegal activity and made drinking sexy and hip, and underground speakeasies, places where illegal alcohol was sold, sprung up across the country. Speakeasies contributed in no small part to the easing of social barriers during this time, as gangsters, businessmen, blue-collar workers, and professionals all gathered to drink. Ironically, the Prohibition movement, fueled by the fear that hordes of Europeans pouring into the country were polluting American values, helped to bring Americans of different cultures and classes together.

Across the country writers such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Carl Sandburg, Ernest Hemingway, and Dorothy Parker were helping to define a distinctly American brand of literary modernism and often used the new urban life as the subject of their work. In architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright was contributing to what became known as the international style, as he designed functional buildings of steel, concrete, and glass. In the visual arts Ansel Adams, Edward Hopper, and Georgia O'Keeffe were developing their own American styles. The music world was the site of experimentation as well, as jazz became popular. By the end of the decade, the good times were over, as the stock market crash, in 1929, destroyed the livelihoods and futures of millions of people and setAmerica on a course of a recovery that would take decades.

Critical Overview

"i was sitting in mcsorley's" appeared in cum-mings's first collection of poetry, *Tulips & Chimneys,* published in 1923. Cummings initially put together a collection of his poems in 1919 but had no success in finding a publisher. In 1922, after Cummings had revised the contents of the collection, his friend, writer John Dos Passos, convinced Liverlight publisher Thomas Meltzer to publish the book. The book that appeared contained only sixty-six of the original 152 poems in the manuscript.

Its critical reception was mixed. Reviewing the collection for *New York World,* Robert E. Wolf writes: "It is extraordinarily good ... it contains, in its own individual style, as beautiful poems as have been written by any present-day poet in the English language." Herbert Gorman of the *New York Times Book Review* is not as effusive, claiming that "Cummings is immensely derivative in a large part of his work," although "often he reaches a high and concentrated pitch of emotion that even his mannerisms cannot hide." *Poetry* founder Harriet Monroe writes that cummings's typography is "irritating" but that "there is a grand gusto in him, and that is rare enough to be welcomed in any age of a world too full of puling pettifoggers and picayunes." Praising the book's musicality and penchant for image-making, James Oppenheim says that cummings's poems "fill out the picture started by the prose. Open *Tulips & Chimneys* at any page, and somewhere upon that page there will be traces, oftentimes thrilling ones, of an inner musical state playing exuberantly with the materials of life."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky has published widely in the field of twentieth-century poetry and culture. In the following essay, he considers "i was sitting in mcsorley's" as an example of cummings's notion of unrealism.

"i was sitting in mcsorley's" is a painterly poem that embodies cummings's idea of what he called "unrealism." Like so many artists and writers at the beginning of the twentieth century, Cummings wanted to make his writing modern. Writing modern poetry meant to "make it new," as Ezra Pound said. This involved challenging the status quo, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was realism and its offshoots.

Realism, a literary movement rooted in the nineteenth century, uses the everyday world as its subject matter. Practitioners of literary realism considered language a tool to show readers the world as it was rather than how it should be. Realistic writing often had a reportorial feel to it. At the beginning of the twentieth century, novelists such as Virginia Woolfe, James Joyce, John Dos Passos, and others challenged this way of representing reality. In poetry, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and H. D. were similarly challenging the status quo, writing verse freed from the confines of formal diction and meter and composing a poetry in speech patterns, dense with images, whose aim was to show that the world wasn't necessarily what people thought that it was. Cummings was part of this modern movement. Claiming that the prism, not the mirror, was the symbol of all art, cummings wrote in his unpublished notebook, which can be found at the Houghton Library, that "the goal is unrealism. The method is destructive. To break up the white light of objective realism, into the secret glories which it contains."

The poem "i was sitting in mcsorley's" demonstrates the practice of cummings's unrealism in action. Ostensibly a portrait of the inside of a famous saloon in lower Manhattan, the poem doesn't show readers what the bar looks like, but rather it evokes in them a sense of the bar's complex atmosphere. Whereas realism by its very nature is selective, showing this and not that, cummings's unrealism is just the opposite, attempting to show everything at once. To accomplish this, cummings developed a method that struck at the very heart of realism's assumption about language.

When light passes through a prism it is dispersed into a number of wavelengths that the human eye experiences as colors. Cummings wants to do the same thing to language and, hence, readers' experience. He is describing the scene at Mc-Sorley' s as if he were looking at it through a prism. However, instead of colors, images are dispersed. This dispersal literally destroys the linearity of cummings's sentences, the order in which he presents the images. But it creates a sense of movement and immediacy, so that readers can see and experience images and incidents simultaneously. An examination of the poem's third stanza will illustrate this method:

the Bar.tinking luscious jigs dint of ripe silver with

warmlyish wetflat splurging smells waltz the glush of squirting taps

plus slush of foam knocked off and a faint piddle-of-drops she says I

ploc spittle what the lands thaz me kid in no sir hopping sawdust you

kiddo he's a palping wreaths of badly Yep cigars who jim him why

gluey grins topple together eyes pout gestures stickily point made glints

squinting who's a wink bum-nothing and money fuzzily mouths take

big wobbly foot-

Using critic Rushworth Kidder's guidelines in "Cummings and Cubism: The Influence of Modern Art on Cummings' Early Poetry" for understanding cummings provides insight into cummings's method. Kidder advises readers to add punctuation and words and to rearrange words if necessary to give a cummings's poem more conventional syntactical meaning. A "translation" of the stanza into standard sentences might look as follows:

The warm bar smelled of flat beer. You could hear the gush of squirting taps and the piddle-of-drops and see the bartender knock the slush of foam from the head of the beers. Voices could be heard above the din, saying things like "Kiddo" and "Hey you," "No sir," "Yep," "Thaz me, kid," and "Who's a bum?" You could hear the tinking of the silver mugs and see the sawdust on the floor. Tipsy people with gluey grins and smoking cigars pack the tables, winking and pointing at one another, flashing money while buying drinks, wobblying.

Cummings critic S. V. Baum, in his article "E. E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy," says this about cummings's technique for creating immediacy: "Because of his extreme honesty as a poet he has been compelled to describe the complex unit of experience without the presence of falsifying temporal order. Perception of the moment involves many impressions, none complete in itself; instead, they blur and overlap one into the other." To achieve this overlapping effect cummings not only fragments impressions and words, but he also creates new ones by literally reconstructing the language. "Glush" and "wetflat" are words illustrating cummings's desire to concentrate multiple sensations in the same word. Ironically, such linguistic precision makes cummings's poetry more real rather than less. Lawrence Weinstein, in his article "On the Precision of E. E. Cummings," underscores the success of this method, noting that "Cummings' precision allows him to describe objects with a particularized approach ... he evokes exactly the object he means to describe." Weinstein cites the image of the "exactly-mutilated ghost of a chair" in McSorley's, claiming that "this description does not simply connote an old chair, but suggests precisely the particular chair in McSorley's Cummings had in mind."

Cummings also juxtaposes unlike terms in his portrait of the bar, a technique popularized by surrealists, to create his "all-in-one-effect." For example, Weinstein notes cummings's use of the description "ripe silver." "Silver," Weinstein observes, "does not ripen, but the juxtaposition of 'ripe' and 'silver' suggests precisely the comfortable, aged atmosphere of the inside of a tavern." Similarly, cummings juxtaposes snatches of

dialogue with description, appealing simultaneously to readers' ears and eyes. Juxtaposition, fragmentation, and overlapping are all techniques used to heighten the sense of the subject. However, these techniques also draw attention to the medium of cummings's art and language and to the idea that words could no longer be considered the mere window onto the physical world that realists assumed they were. Cummings offers a compelling alternative to the notion that art's goal is to imitate life through an accurate depiction of the empirical world.

At the time "i was sitting in mcsorley's" was written, theUnited States was experiencing the aftermath of World War I. It was a time of excitement and confusion and prosperity and fear. The automobile and the telephone were changing the ways in which people thought about and experienced time and space. Movie houses were also springing up around the country, playing motion pictures and newsreels of world events, consolidating images of the past and present. The world was becoming a smaller place. By fragmenting the language he uses to describe the world, cummings presents a portrait of a fragmented world in which everything is happening at once. The demand that he places on readers to understand his poems is similar to the rapidly changing world's demand on people in their daily lives. In this sense, cummings's poems do not challenge the idea of realism as much as they help redefine realism. His "destruction" of words, word order, linearity, and sense provide readers with a hyper-real vision of things. It is a vision even truer today than it was at the beginning of the century.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "i was sitting in mcsorley's," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Smith is a writer and editor. In this essay, she describes "i was sitting in mcsorley's" by e. e. cummings as a meditation on love as well as an individual's relationship with the natural world.

At first glance, e. e. cummings's poem "i was sitting in mcsorley's barely seems to be a poem at all. Arranged not in stanzas and lines like most poems, but in paragraphs like a prose passage, the poem further baffles many readers with its bizarre spelling and punctuation. Much of the poem seems to be an incomprehensible run-on sentence, the words following one another with no apparent logic. Once a reader puts aside his or her expectations of what a poem should look like, however, "i was sitting in mcsorley's" is revealed to be not only a deeply poetic piece of writing but a poem with a strong connection to the rest of cummings's work.

Throughout his long career in American poetry, cummings was know for his unorthodox style of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. He would often leave the first letter of a line in one of his poems uncapitalized, while capitalizing a word in the middle of the line. Words would run into each other or be separated by long spaces. Lines would break in unexpected places. Cummings used these methods to bring a freshness and sense of excitement to his poems. By using such novel arrangements of his text, he also created new stresses and tensions in his poetry that would have been impossible to achieve using ordinary arrangements of words. In this way, he was following the lead of the American poet Walt Whitman, whose long lines managed to capture the exuberant rush produced by saying each line in a single deep breath.

Both poets ran words together, either to express two related ideas in a single image (such as the "wetflat" smells in line 9) or, using the technique known as juxtaposition, to force unrelated ideas together to create a fresh, new image. Cummings's unique typography also serves to make not only the individual words but the poem itself more than just words on a page. His poems become carefully arranged word pictures. In this way, he followed the lead of the founder of the imagist school, American poet Ezra Pound, who felt that each word in a poem must be like a Chinese pictogram, containing a concrete image as well as an abstract meaning.

In the case of "i was sitting in mcsorley's," cummings arranges the poem like a prose passage, with paragraphs instead of stanzas. This type of a poem is known as a prose poem. A famous example of this type of poetry is the collection of prose poems by the French poet Charles Baudelaire,*Paris Spleen.* Cummings's "i was sitting in mcsorley's" shares with *Paris Spleen* a vision of discontent, of an ugly human world into which something ugly frequently intrudes. At the same time, "i was sitting in mcsorley's" plays on two of cummings's most frequent themes: the relation between the human and the natural world, and the need and desire for love.

The first two paragraphs of the poem immediately describe the first of these themes. The poet is sitting inside McSorley's Saloon inGreenwich Village, New York City.

Outside it is "beautifully snowing," (line 2) but inside it is "snug and evil" (line 3). The second paragraph is a sort of verbal collage of various impressions of the interior of the bar, mostly consisting of visual images, all thrown together seemingly at random. Cummings's technique here serves to convey the fragmented way one would hear and see things if he or she were sitting inside the bar.

The third paragraph continues in this mode, including in its collage effect snippets of the conversations that fill the air inside McSorley's. What is most notable in this paragraph and the one before it is the palpable sense of decay that fills the inside of the bar. The imagery is full of words that sound somehow disgusting: gobs, spittle, piddle, skulch. These and the various bits of conversation related in this paragraph help to heighten the sense that it is indeed "snug and evil" inside the bar.

The noise inside the bar both brings readers closer to the other people and yet, at the same time, distances readers from them. By only allowing readers to hear little pieces of conversation, they are prevented from understanding what the people are really talking about. And by mixing up their conversations with words used to describe the way the bar looks and sounds, cummings makes it seem like the people are just a part of the bar. In fact, he never describes these people; he only gives readers parts of their conversations. This makes them seem like a part of the atmosphere in the bar and not like real people at all. At the same time, the act of eavesdropping on their conversations makes readers see the poet as something of a voyeur.

Starting with the fourth paragraph, however, there is a break in the way the poet's impressions of the bar are reported. Instead of giving readers sound impressions, he now only uses visual imagery. And at the same time, the sense of nastiness, almost of evil, is increased.

It begins with the first glimpse of the poet himself, who is sitting, drinking the ale, "which never lets you grow old" and blinking (note the sudden return to primarily visual imagery) at the ceiling, almost as if he hopes to be lifted above, or at least out of the atmosphere inside the bar. While the poet feels pleasant enough, he is constantly being reminded of where he is by the retchings of the patrons; and although he mostly just looks, his lamp remains "worthless," perhaps because it only gives light but does not illuminate.

Then into his awareness comes a stranger. This is also the first time a person is actually described in the poem. But the description is of someone monstrous: the head is "bald greenish" and "foetal"; the neck is huge and unwashed; the hands are like paws and "distended," almost as if they belong to a corpse. Yet while readers are being inundated by this sudden flood of detail, at the same time they are losing senses; while the poet first noted the head in an instant of light falling on it, soon the instant is "semiluminous," and the trunk of the other man is both "nondescript" and "wordless." This last detail is extremely important.

The poet, confronted by the approach of this strange person, seems to be filled with loathing ("nausea" is part of his sense-impressions of the man). "Darkness it was so

near to me," he notes (line 32). Yet even when confronted by this apparently disgusting person, the poet does not give in to his fear but instead asks him if he would like a drink. Confronted with everything that is terrible and evil in the bar, he chooses to reach out to it, to try to connect with it.

Just as the man seems to be more than an ordinary bar patron (who has perhaps had too much to drink), so too does asking him if he would like a drink seem to be more than just a friendly invitation. The request is described as "the eternal perpetual question" and can be seen as the ultimate attempt to reach out to a world of decay and death, where one is always separated from the rest of the world, just as cummings is separated from the patrons at the bar. Thus, not only is the man (who is always described as "it") a person, he is the "Darkness" of line 32 and possibly also the world itself, or at least its evil and ugly parts. To truly love and embrace the world, cummings seems to be saying, it's necessary to be able to embrace its ugly side, to unite with its decay, to take that risk in exchange for connection.

But it does not happen in this poem. The man does not answer. McSorley's remains "snugan-devil." (Note that by running the words together, cummings manages to include the word "devil" in his repeat of his first impression of McSorley's.) And outside, it remains "beautifully snowing. . . ." In contrast to the decaying human world of the bar, the outside world of natural processes (snowing) is beautiful.

Yet at the same time, the poet remains inside the bar, which is not just evil but snug. There is something comfortable about staying inside, risking the chance of human connection (which may remain forever impossible) rather than going outside into the snow, which will remain forever inaccessible to the poet.

The poem "i was sitting in mcsorley's" thus touches on two of cummings's most important themes: that love is the most important thing to have (he tries to love the man in the bar, in his own poor way, by offering him a drink) and the beauty of the outside world. At the same time, it shows the tension of trying to hold onto these beliefs in an imperfect human world. Remarkable for its brilliant collage of impressions, which manage to convey the inside of a crowded New York City bar with all its sights, sounds, smells, and tastes, "i was sitting in mcsorley's" is also a serious poem about the ache of being human.

Source: Erica Smith, Critical Essay on "i was sitting in mcsorley's," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

Caedmon/HarperAudio distributes a set of au-diocassettes entitled *E. E. Cummings: Nonlec-tures.* In these talks, cummings offers his views on art and aesthetics.

E. E. Cummings: The Making of a Poet is a videocassette distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences. It profiles cummings's poetic development in his own words.

Summer Stream distributes an audiocassette of cummings reading his poems as part of their Poetic Heritage Series.

E. E. Cummings: Twentieth-Century Poetry in English: Recordings of Poets Reading Their Own Poetry, an audiocassette, is distributed by the Library of Congress.

The E. E. Cummings Society's journal, *Spring,* is published annually, and includes criticism of Cummings and reviews of critical studies of the poet. *Spring's* website, http://www.gvsu.edu/english/Cummings/Index.htm (last accessed April 2001), includes links to other useful cummings sites.

Topics for Further Study

Research prohibition in theUnited States and write an essay exploring the contradictions between the law and the reality of alcohol consumption in the country during that time.

Using cummings's own unconventional writing style, compose a poem that focuses more on your impression of an individual than your perception of how he or she looks.

Translate "i was sitting in mcsorley's" into conventional grammar and word form. What is changed and what is gained in the translation?

Research a coffee house, a bar, a restaurant, or some other place in your neighborhood where artists and writers gather, then explain the appeal of that place in a short essay.

Write a poem about a place that represents humanity at its worse.

What Do I Read Next?

Cummings's 1922 prose work *The Enormous Room* details his experience as a prisoner of the French during World War I. Cummings was working for the American Red Cross at the time he was imprisoned for insubordination. The book is considered by many critics to be an American classic.

Poet and critic Gerald Locklin explores the influence of cummings on contemporary poets such as Richard Kostelanetz, Edward Field, and Ronald Koertge in his 1993 essay "The Influence of Cummings on Selected Contemporary Poets."

In addition to his biography of cummings, *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings* (1980), Richard S. Kennedy also wrote a critical study of cummings's work, *E. E. Cummings Revisited,* which reviews much of the more recent critical work on the poet.

Byron Farwell's study of America's involvement in World War I, *Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (1999), provides an in-depth look at theUnited States's role in the Great War. Farwell tells the story of how theUnited States responded to a war it was not prepared to fight. This study helps to contextualize cummings's own formative experiences as an ambulance driver for the Allies.

Further Study

Cohen, Milton A., *Poet and the Painter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings's Early Work,* Wayne State University Press, 1987.

Cohen explores cummings's development as an artist and poet by analyzing his notes on aesthetic theory. This is an important study of cummings's influences and how his theories on writing and painting came together.

Cureton, Richard D., "Poetry, Grammar, and Epistemology: The Order of Prenominal Modifiers in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings," in *Language & Structure* Vol. 18, No. 1, 1985, pp. 64-91.

Cureton analyzes cummings's use of adjectives in his poetry, exploring the connection between cummings's adjectival order and his ideology.

McBride, Katharine Winters, ed., *A Concordance to the Complete Poems of E. E. Cummings,* Cornell University Press, 1989.

This book lists more than 13,000 words used by cum-ming, including combined words and neologisms (made up words) found in *Complete Poems.* This is a useful text for those doing a systematic study of cummings's poetry.

Norman, Charles, *E. E. Cummings: The Magic-Maker,* Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1958.

This biography of cummings is thorough and well researched.Norman makes connections between cummings's emotional development and his development as an artist but does not pretend to be a psychologist.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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