somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond Study Guide

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond by E. E. Cummings

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Introduction

Edward Estlin Cummings, known to most of his readers as e. e. cummings, first published "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" in 1931 in his poetry collection, *ViVa*. As with all of his other poems, the author did not give this poem an actual title. For purposes of identification, editors simply refer to each of cummings's poems by its first line. The poem is very clearly a love poem, and cummings is renowned for his love poetry. Critics, however, have singled this poem out as one of cummings's best love poems.

The poem details the profound feelings of love that the speaker has for his beloved, and his wonder over this mysterious power that the woman has over him. Over the course of the short poem, the speaker examines and praises this power, and notes how his beloved has transformed him. The speaker in the poem may or may not be cummings himself, although the intensity of emotion expressed in the poem leads one to believe that the poet is describing his own experiences. When cummings published "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," he had been married to Anne Barton for two years. While Barton might have been the source of the poem's inspiration, this inspiration would have been short-lived, for cummings and Barton divorced a year later, in 1932. A current copy of the poem can be found in *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962*, which was published in hardcover by Liveright in 1994.

Author Biography

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894, cummings spent his childhood in that city, where his father Edward Cummings was a sociology professor at Harvard and a Unitarian clergyman. From an early age, cummings showed a strong interest in poetry and art, which was encouraged by his mother Rebecca. Cummings attended Harvard University from 1911 to 1915 and joined the editorial board of the *Harvard Monthly*, a college literary magazine. While in college, he became fascinated by avant-garde art, modernism, and cubism, and he began incorporating elements of these styles into his own poetry and paintings. He received a bachelor's degree in 1915 and a master's the following year. His first published poems appeared in the anthology *Eight Harvard Poets* in 1917. These eight pieces feature the experimental verse forms and the lower-case personal pronoun "i" that were to become his trademark. The copyeditor of the book, however, mistook cummings's intentions as typographical errors and made "corrections." During World War I, cummings volunteered for the French-based Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service. As a result of his disregard of regulations and his attempts to outwit the wartime censors in his letters home, cummings spent four months in an internment camp in Normandy on suspicion of treason. Although he found his detention amusing and even enjoyable, his father made use of his contacts in government to secure his son's release. Cummings returned to New York and pursued painting but was drafted in 1918. He spent about a year at Camp Danvers, Massachusetts, during which time he wrote prolifically. Beginning around this time, cummings, with the knowledge and approval of his friend Schofield Thayer, had an affair with Schofield's wife Elaine. Cummings's daughter Nancy was born in 1919, but she was given Thayer's name. Cummings and Elaine Thayer married in 1924, at which time cummings legally adopted Nancy. During the 1920s and 1930s, he traveled widely in Europe, alternately living in Paris and New York and developing parallel careers as a poet and a painter. He published his first poetry collection, *Tulips and Chimneys*, in 1923. Politically liberal with leftist leanings, cummings visited the Soviet Union in 1931 to learn about that government's system of art subsidies. He was very disillusioned, however, by the regimentation and lack of personal and artistic freedom he encountered there. As a result, he abandoned his liberal views and became deeply conservative on social and political issues. Cummings continued to write steadily throughout the 1940s and 1950s, reaching his greatest popularity during this period and winning a number of honors, including the Shelley Memorial Award for poetry in 1944, the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard for the academic year 1952-1953, and the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1958. Despite such successes, however, he never achieved a steady income. Cummings continued to give poetry readings to college audiences across the United States until his death in 1962.

Poem Text

somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond
any experience,your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which I cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully,mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me,i and
my life will shut very beautifully,suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens;only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" begins with the title words. The words, "somewhere" and "travelled" imply that the speaker is about to tell the reader about a journey that he has taken or will take. This journey is a happy one, as the word "gladly" indicates, although the reader does not know at this point the destination of this journey. In the end of the first line and beginning of the second line, the poet clarifies that this journey is "beyond / any experience" that he has ever had. He also, curiously, notes that "your eyes have their silence." The "your" indicates that the speaker is talking to another person, who for some reason has silent eyes. The reader can determine that the poet is discussing metaphysical concepts, abstract ideas that cannot be experienced by one's physical senses. In the real world, eyes do not have the capability of producing noise, so they are, by default, silent. The discussion of the person's eyes, along with the use of the word "gladly," gives readers their first indication that this might be a love poem. Eyes are thought by many to be a window into a person's soul, and poets often describe their lovers' eyes in positive terms.

In the third line, the use of the words "frail gesture" indicates that the person to whom the speaker is dedicating this poem is most likely a woman. At the time this poem was written, frailty was often used to describe womanhood. While this idea has since become a negative stereotype to many, readers in cummings's time would have recognized this frailty as a compliment to the woman in the poem. The speaker notes that this woman's frail gestures contain "things which enclose me," or which he "cannot touch because they are too near." The speaker is not saying that these things are literally enclosing him. Instead, these things the feelings that are produced in the speaker by this woman's enchanting glance are so powerful that he feels enclosed by them. At the same time, although these feelings surround him, he cannot touch them, because they are so all-consuming that they have become a deeply ingrained part of him. At this point, the reader can see that when the speaker discusses the "somewhere" to which he is travelling, he is not talking about a literal, physical journey. Rather, his journey is metaphysical, and the woman's eyes are the means by which the speaker makes this journey.

Stanza 2

The speaker underscores the power of the woman's glance with the first two lines of the second stanza. The speaker notes that the woman can easily "unclose," or open him, even though he has up until that point "closed myself as fingers." Here, the speaker is talking about the power of love to change a person's perspective. The speaker could be talking about his feelings about love. Perhaps he has been hurt in the past and so has closed himself off from the idea of love. Or, he could be closed in the sense of being pessimistic about the current state of society. When cummings wrote the poem, the

United States was in the grip of the Great Depression, a financial disaster that changed the lives and moods of many. In any case, the speaker's love for this woman has opened him up, and he is basking in these new emotions. In the third line of the stanza, the speaker elaborates on how the woman opens him up, using the analogy of a rose opening up in spring. In this poem, however, the speaker personifies the season of spring. Poets use personification when they give human-like qualities to nonhuman items. When the poet notes that "Spring opens / (touching skilfully,mysteriously) her first rose," he is referring to spring as a person, who is physically opening up the rose.

Stanza 3

The speaker continues his discussion of the woman's power, noting that just as she can easily open him up, "if your wish be to close me, i and / my life will shut very beautifully,suddenly." The speaker is in the woman's complete control, to the point that she has power over his life and his death. While death is generally considered a negative concept, in the context of this poem, the speaker describes it as beautiful, equating his hypothetical death with the impending death of a flower, which "imagines / the snow carefully everywhere descending." Again, the poet uses personification. While a flower is alive in the organic sense, it does not have the human quality of imagination. By describing the rose in this way, the poet paints a unique picture. The rose, coming to the end of its seasonal life in the fall, is imagining the snow that will soon be falling, a sign of the flower's impending and unavoidable death in winter. Since the lifecycle of the rose is eternal (the flower will experience a rebirth again in spring) its death is not tragic. By equating his own hypothetical death at his lover's hands with the rose's death, the speaker's death is not tragic, either. It is important that the speaker does this. A discussion of death could very easily give this love poem a negative mood. By referring to death "beautifully," the poem retains the positive mood that it established with the word "gladly" in the first stanza.

Stanza 4

In the first line of the fourth stanza, the speaker alludes to the metaphysical quality of the woman's power, by noting that "nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals / the power of your intense fragility." Again, this woman's fragility, or femininity, is so powerful that it transcends the physical world. The speaker examines the "texture" of this femininity, which he says "compels" him with the "colour of its countries." A reader may at first be confused by the use of the word, "countries." The speaker does not literally mean that the woman's intense femininity is composed of countries, in a geographic sense. Rather, by referring to the woman in this way, the speaker makes the woman seem larger than life, as if her feminine powers occupy a metaphysical world of their own. The speaker has already referred to the physical "world" in the first line of this stanza. Now, in this feminine, metaphysical world, he examines the countries, or specific details that make up this woman's femininity, and they fascinate him. In the last line of the stanza, he notes that these feminine qualities can render "death and forever

with each breathing." Here, the speaker builds on the idea of the previous stanza, underscoring the power that the woman has over his life and death.

Stanza 5

As the speaker notes in the final stanza, as much as he examines the specific aspects of the woman's femininity, he does not know "what it is about you that closes / and opens." The speaker is unsure how the woman has such a power over him, how she can open him or close him, how she can control his life and death so easily. This is not a bad thing. The speaker does not want to know. He is caught up in the mystery of the woman's power and knows only that "something in me understands / the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)." Previously in the poem, the speaker has equated his lover's power to the power that spring has to open a rose. Now, he is saying that his lover's power is even stronger than this natural, seasonal power. In one final, potent image, the speaker underscores the idea that this woman's power is unmatched by anything in nature: "nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands." The speaker is personifying the rain, and imagining it as the "hands" that spring uses to open roses. While this is an impressive natural power, the speaker says that his lover is even more impressive. Her "hands" are smaller, which in this context means that the woman has the ability to open up the speaker to an even deeper extent than that of a rose opened by the spring rains.

Themes

Love

It is very clear from the beginning that this poem is a love poem about the poet's beloved. Although the language is cryptic at first, as it is in many of cummings's poems, in the second line of the poem he identifies the subject of the poem by saying, "your eyes have their silence." A poet's reference to the eyes of his beloved is an age-old tradition. The eyes are commonly thought to be the windows into a person's soul, and much love poetry has been written about eyes. Cummings continues his profession of love and underscores the power of his beloved's eyes by noting that "your slightest look will easily unclose me / though i have closed myself as fingers." The poet is noting the power of love to change a person, in this case, change the poet from a closed person to an open one. As is common in love poetry, the poet expresses his adoration for his beloved by making her seem larger than life. In addition to having the power to change him from a closed man to an open one, this unnamed woman also has the power to do the reverse: "if your wish be to close me, i and / my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly." At the same time, the poet notes that this powerful woman is also very feminine, in the frail sense that his contemporary readers would have understood. Cummings says "nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals / the power of your intense fragility." The poem is also very sensual, using the image of a blooming rose, which is often given sexual connotations by writers.

Nature

Cummings's discussion of his adoration for his beloved goes hand-in-hand with his love of nature. When he is describing how easy it is for his lover's glance to open him up, if she wishes, cummings compares this process to a natural one, the blooming of a rose: "you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose." Cummings continues the natural allusions when he talks about his lover closing him. He notes that if this were to happen, it would be the same "as when the heart of this flower imagines / the snow carefully everywhere descending." In other words, cummings is linking the opening of himself to a flower's blooming in Spring, while the closing of himself is associated with a flower's death, as winter arrives and snow falls.

While the poet is infatuated with nature, he also notes that his beloved is more beautiful and her glance is more powerful than nature. He first talks about this idea in the context of the roses that he discussed earlier in the poem. He notes, "the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses." His lover's eyes literally speak to this poet, as roses often speak to others, though in a symbolic sense. The poet expands on this idea when he incorporates another emblem of nature□rain. Cummings says "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands." The rain is one of the natural catalysts that help a rose to bloom. The rain drops, which cummings is referring to as "hands," help to open the

roses during their blooming, as if they are literally hands that pull open the petals. Yet, the poet is saying that his beloved's skilful power to open him up rivals even that of nature to open up the flower.

Faith

Throughout all of his professions of love, the poet does not express a desire to understand why his lover has such power over him and why he has such faith in her. In fact, he appreciates the fact that the origins of his faith in his lover's power remain shrouded in mystery. The poet is traveling "gladly beyond / any experience" that he has ever had. In other words, he is in the metaphysical world, the only place where intangible concepts such as love and faith can be examined. Physically, nobody can identify how people fall in love or generate their faith in that love. The poet, however, is not trying to understand the origin of his faith, even though he examines it throughout the poem. Love's mystery, which he equates with nature's mystery□as when "Spring opens (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose"□is more beautiful because it remains mysterious. As he notes at the end of the poem, "(i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens." For the poet, this is the way he prefers it. If the poet knew exactly where and why these intense feelings of his originated, it would steal some of the passion that he feels by blindly following his faith in his beloved.

Style

Imagery

For a reader who is new to cummings, or who is new to poetry, this poem may seem confusing at first. While the poem contains concrete images of objects such as eyes and roses, the ways that the poet chooses to describe them are often unusual or contradictory. For example, in the first stanza, the speaker talks about things that he "cannot touch because they are too near." This seems paradoxical at first, and hard to imagine, because if something is very close to somebody, that person should be able to touch it. When the reader realizes that cummings is speaking in metaphysical terms, the poem starts to make more sense, as do its image systems, which collectively evoke a sense of intense love and passion. Cummings uses two main image systems in his poem□human anatomy and nature. The poem's focus on anatomical imagery is apparent from the second line, when the speaker discusses his beloved's eyes. These eyes have such a power over the speaker that one look can easily "unclose" him. Likewise, a "frail gesture" made by the woman evokes powerful feelings from the speaker. The poem ends with anatomical imagery, as the speaker discusses "the voice of your eyes" and "small hands" that rival the manipulative powers of nature.

While even nature is ultimately shown to be inferior to the speaker's beloved in this final stanza, it plays an important part in the poem's imagery in the second and third stanzas. Here, the speaker uses the natural image of nature controlling a flower's lifecycle□opening in spring; dying in winter□to express the power that his beloved has over his own life. By using natural images to first establish the power of nature, these final images indicate even more effectively that the woman's powers are superior to those of nature.

Symbolism

A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning that their significance is only relevant within a specific literary work. They can also be universal symbols, meaning that their significance is based on traditional associations that are widely recognized, regardless of context. In this poem, cummings relies mainly on universal symbols, which add a subtext, or second meaning, to the poem. As with the imagery, these symbols are taken from nature. The rose is a flower commonly associated with love and romance, so the blooming roses help to symbolize the speaker's blooming love. The flower symbolism runs deeper than that, however. Budding flowers are also a common symbol used to signify sexual love. Since many of cummings's poems, especially his early works, were erotic in nature, his use of a known sexual symbol was probably intentional.

Yet, cummings flips the common sexual symbolism around. Generally, when a writer uses a budding flower to symbolize sexual love, it is associated with women, who physically open themselves to men during sexual intercourse. Cummings seems to hint at this symbolism, when he organizes one of the lines in the second stanza as follows: "you open always petal by petal myself." The first two words, "you open," at first seem to be talking about the woman opening up. As the line progresses, however, the reader can see that it is the woman doing the opening. Cummings could have been grammatically correct and written the line as follows: "you always open me petal by petal." By structuring the line as he did, however, cummings gives the line, and the poem, a unique symbolism that, once again, underscores the power that the woman has over the speaker.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

When cummings wrote his poem in the early 1930s, America was in the grips of the Great Depression, a massive economic disaster that affected the entire country. As a result, many people did not have the luxury of being in awe over love, as cummings is in the poem. Most were focused on basic survival. Although the exact causes of the Great Depression are still debated, most historians agree that the Stock Market Crash of 1929 helped to usher in this huge economic downturn. As the country began to have increasing financial troubles, however, President Herbert Hoover, along with many others, refused to provide federal aid to struggling individuals. The Hoover administration felt that the crisis was only temporary, and that in any case, it would not help Americans to give them handouts. Unfortunately, the situation only got worse. As the jobless rate rose, starvation and suicide became an issue for many families. Millions of families migrated to try to find a better life and available work in other regions of the country, but in many cases, they found neither, and instead set up shelters on vacant lots in other cities and towns, which came to be known as Hoovervilles after President Hoover, who many blamed for the depression.

The Rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party

At the same time, the world was recovering from the financial and emotional impact of World War I, while trying to prevent another world war. Although war was technically outlawed by the Kellogg- Briand Pact, some countries refused to disarm, while others had disarmed and wished to arm again for their own protection. In addition, Germany, one of the primary aggressors in the First World War, was made to pay large reparations for its role in the war. Unfortunately, when the Great Depression hit America, it also affected other countries, including Germany, which was having its own financial problems. The Germans, inspired by Adolf Hitler and frustrated over their own rising unemployment, became increasingly hostile on the issue of war reparations payments. This issue helped Hitler and his Nazi Party gain in popularity, especially when the worldwide depression in the early 1930s affected Germany's ability to make its reparations payments. In addition to rebelling against making reparations, Hitler also spoke out against Jews, blaming the rising rate of German unemployment on Jewish businessmen. This was the beginning of an ethnic-cleansing policy that would eventually take the lives of millions of Jews. Following such horrific acts, many felt that the innocence of humanity was gone. After the war's end in 1945, however, many Americans tried to avoid these unpleasant thoughts and focus on the simple things in life, including love.

Critical Overview

When discussing the critical reception of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," one should first examine cummings's overall reputation, since his poetry has often been described in absolute positive or negative terms, especially in the first half of his career when he wrote "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond." Cummings's unique structural style and unconventional use of punctuation was disturbing to many of his contemporary critics, and people tended to either love his poetry or hate it. As R. P. Blackmur notes in his influential 1931 article for the *Hound & Horn*, "Critics have commonly said, when they understood Mr. Cummings' vocabulary at all, that he has enriched the language with a new idiom." At the same time, Blackmur also indicates that the "typographical peculiarities" of Cummings's poetry "have caught and irritated public attention." The negativity aimed toward cummings's poetry can also be seen, indirectly, in the relative lack of formal criticism of the poet, especially during these early decades.

In subsequent decades, as more poets began to employ unconventional forms and techniques, cummings's reputation also improved. As Robert E. Maurer notes in his 1955 article for the *Bucknell Review*, "It is unfortunate that most of the critical appraisals of Cummings' poetry were made early, shortly after his first books were published." Maurer disputes the idea that cummings did not know poetic rules, and so chose to use gimmicks in his writing. Maurer says, "He is instead a prime example of the old adage that an artist must know all the rules before he can break them." Likewise, in *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979), Rushworth M. Kidder notes that "It is important to recognize . . . that the spatial arrangements of [cummings'] poems are the work neither of a whimsical fancy nor a lust for novelty."

Today, cummings is widely regarded as one of the great twentieth-century poets. In addition, while his poem, "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," has not been examined in great detail by many critics, the poem has become one of cummings's most well-known poems and has become a favorite with readers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses cummings's use of punctuation in his poem.

Many people first think of cummings's uses of language, especially his odd methods of punctuation, when they think of the poet. In fact, his unconventional approach to poetry inspired the wrath of many conservative critics during his lifetime. As S. V. Baum notes in his 1954 *South Atlantic Quarterly* article, "E. E. Cummings has served as the indispensable whipping boy for those who are outraged by the nature of modern poetry." Yet, cummings has also been acknowledged, especially recently, as one of the great modern love poets. In turn, the poem, "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond," is often thought of as one of cummings's best love poems. As Robert K. Johnson notes in his 1994 entry on the poem in the *Reference Guide to American Literature*, it "exemplifies Cummings's many poems in praise of love." It is cummings's unique use of language that makes "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" such a potent statement on the powerful qualities of love.

It is apparent from a first glance at the poem that cummings follows his own rules when it comes to the use of language. This is most noticeable in his lack of spaces. The first line reads "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," a sentence construct that lacks proper grammar. Normally, when a writer uses a comma, he or she includes a space after it, to set the preceding phrase apart from the words that come after it. In this first line, however, cummings runs all of the words and the comma together. In fact, he continues this throughout the poem anywhere there is a comma in the middle of a line. One may wonder at first, as some critics have, whether cummings is doing this just to be individualistic. Yet, if one examines this odd use of punctuation in relation to cummings's theme of love, it makes sense why he is running all of the words together. Cummings is so enamored of his beloved that he does not want to even take the customary pauses that punctuation marks, such as commas, introduce into a line of poetry.

One can also find support for this idea by examining the poem's periods□or lack thereof. Poets use periods in different ways within their poetry. Some use them mid-line, to force readers to slow down in their reading. Others use them at the ends of lines to finish thoughts. At the very least, however, poets often use a period or some other end mark such as a question mark to close out the poem and signal to the reader that they have finished the examination of their subject. In "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," cummings does not do this. In fact, he does not include any periods at any point in the poem. It is as if he wants to indicate grammatically the timeless quality of his love, which will never end.

Cummings's lack of capitalization also underscores this idea. Just as there are no periods in the poem, there are also no capitalized words. While poets vary in their use of capitals, they will often at the very least capitalize the first word of the first line, to indicate that it is the beginning of the poem. In fact, in cummings's time, poets were

expected to do much more. Baum says "Academic procedure obligates the poet to capitalize the initial letter in every line and the pronoun *I* wherever it may occur." Cummings, however, ignored this rule, as he ignored most other poetic rules. He did this for various reasons. Within the context of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," he does not capitalize any words, including the first word of the first line. The overall effect makes it seem as if the poem has no beginning. When this effect is combined with the effect created by the lack of a period at the end of the poem, it makes it seem as the poem has no beginning or end. The poem is eternal, just as the poet's love is eternal.

The lack of capitalization, specifically in the pronoun "I," also supports the poet's extreme devotion to his lover. As Baum notes of cummings's poetry in general, "By rejecting the pronoun *I* Cummings assumes a casual humility." This idea is well suited to "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond," because the poet is completely humble. He is totally signing away any power he has over himself, even his life and death, to his beloved. Therefore, it is appropriate for him not to capitalize the pronoun that indicates himself. Likewise, the total lack of capitalization in the poem underscores the poet's feelings of humility. He is so meek that he does not capitalize any of the words in the poem. It is as if he does not want to call attention to any one part of the poem. He wants to emphasize, and wants his readers to understand, the all-consuming power of his lover's beauty and influence, which affects him so deeply that he cannot even give special emphasis to one element through the use of capitalization. This idea underscores the eternal, timeless quality of his love.

That said, however, the poet does use another form of punctuation, the parentheses, to emphasize certain moments within this eternal time scale. This is a common technique in cummings's poetry. Baum says "One of the most important elements in Cummings's technique of immediacy is the set of parenthetical marks." To Baum, this is cummings's attempt to describe the effect of "all-at-oneness" that happens when people perceive a specific moment in time. Baum sees cummings's attempts to do this as a function of "his extreme honesty as a poet," which compels cummings "to describe the complex unit of experience without the presence of falsifying temporal order." In other words, when people describe a moment of their experience, it can be described several different ways, so people generally just choose one and talk about the experience from this angle. Or, they talk about the experience in different ways, but not all at once. They say one observation, then another observation that addresses a different aspect.

For cummings, however, this is not good enough. He wants to describe everything that he is feeling all at once. So he uses parentheses to indicate that the parenthetical information is all part of the same momentary experience. For example, in "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," cummings describes how the power of his lover's glance can open him up "as Spring opens / (touching skilfully,mysteriously) her first rose." In reality, the information contained in the parenthetical and nonparenthetical portions of cummings's description explains two different aspects of a flower's blooming. One describes the physical action of Spring actually opening the rose. The other underscores the expertise and mystery of this same act, even as it happens. In a normal conversation, somebody would probably describe the fact that the rose opened,

then discuss the mysterious aspects of this natural process. As Baum notes, however, this type of description imposes a false temporal order that does not exist naturally, and cummings refuses to do this.

Likewise, in the other use of parenthetical text in the poem, cummings offers an acknowledgement of the mystery of the power his lover holds over him, even as he is discussing that power. Cummings says "(i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens;only something in me understands / the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)." It is as if cummings is trying to let readers inside his mind, so that they can follow his unorganized thoughts as he is having them. In novels, this is a technique known as stream of consciousness, and it involves literally going inside a character's head and following his or her jumbled thoughts. Cummings mimics this effect in his use of parenthetical descriptions, as if he does not want the reader to miss out on any part of the experience that he is having as he thinks about the power and mystery of his beloved.

In the end, this is the key to understanding cummings's love poem. He uses the various forms of punctuation that are at his disposal□including spaces, periods, capitalization, and parentheses□ in unconventional ways, in an attempt to let readers inside his mind. The poet's goal is have readers experience the depth and potency of his love in the same way that he is experiencing it.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses cummings's poem as an exploration of transcendental love and spiritual knowledge.

Cummings's love poems are celebrations of a many-leveled intimacy between a man and a woman. Many of them also reveal a mystical longing for transcendence that grows out of the experience of love. Transcendence is the experience of a dimension of life that is beyond all everyday categories, something that feels utterly complete, is timeless and silent, and conveys the feeling of being at the very root and essence of existence, beyond all distinctions of subject and object, of "I" and "you."

"somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" is one such poem. At its most immediate level, it is a poem that honors an inexplicable mystery: how, through the experience of love, one human being can awaken something in the beloved that nothing or no one else has ever managed to touch. Lovers will recognize this experience, the sense that one's whole being has opened up to the call from another, and that nothing can now be hidden or held back. No amount of seminars, books, or workshops on how to find love can teach this experience to anyone. It just happens when it happens, and it often leaves the person, as the speaker in the poem testifies, lost in wonder at the mystery of it and searching for words to express what is inexpressible.

It is at this point that the experience of being in love, of knowing and being known at the deepest levels not of personality but of soul, comes close to some types of mystical experience and parallels the language□cosmic, boundless, paradoxical□in which such experiences are expressed. It is at this meeting point of the sensual and the mystical, attained through love, that many of cummings's poems seem to hover, at the place where words give way to the wordless, talk gives way to silence, and there is a paradoxical experience of an empty fullness in which all meaning is contained and is also at rest.

What is this experience, referred to in the first stanza, of which the poet speaks? Perhaps the key phrase is "your eyes have their silence." It is not difficult to imagine the situation: two lovers sit gazing into each other's eyes. It is often said that eyes are the windows of the soul, and humans have always known the power of eye-to-eye contact. Anyone who has ever gazed steadily into the eyes of another will testify that it can produce a feeling of deep communion and primal sympathy between the two people, the sense that "I and this person are one," existing in a timeless, silent ocean of consciousness. If this kind of eye contact is conducted as a spiritual exercise with a friend or even a complete stranger, the effect can be very similar. In fact, the practice of "gazing" was used by the thirteenth century Sufi poet and mystic Rumi in his relationship with his spiritual master Shams-i-Tabriz. As Rumi gazed into the eyes of the master, there was a spiritual transmission; the prolonged eye contact dissolved the smallness of the individual self and allowed Rumi an experience of the totality of infinite love. Rumi wrote of an experience like this (quoted in Harvey):

One look from you, and I look
At you in all things
Looking back at me: those eyes
in which all things live and burn

This puts in mind line 5 of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," in which the lover says to the beloved, "your slightest look easily will unclose me." The respected Indian spiritual teacher Ramana Maharshi, quoted in Will Johnson's *Rumi: Gazing on the Beloved*, once put it this way: "When the eyes of the student meet the gaze of the teacher, words of instruction are no longer necessary."

This, or something similar to it, seems to be the core experience out of which the poem arises. Seen in this light, the statement in line 1, that the speaker has never traveled to this "somewhere," suggests that such an experience is beyond the everyday, egobound self, cummings's "i," which consists of an unruly collection of thoughts, desires, feelings and memories. This "i" can indeed never travel to this "place," which exists as a completely different mode of timeless consciousness and which supplies anyone who becomes aware of it with a new sense of who he or she really is. Cummings said this fairly explicitly in another of his later poems, "stand with your lover on the ending earth," in which the "i" this time represents the higher awareness:

□how fortunate are you and i, whose home
is timelessness: we who have wandered down
from fragrant mountains of eternal now

This is the real self that exists in timelessness, and which is simply overlooked or forgotten when the individual "wanders down" and focuses his or her attention on the things that exist in the endlessly repetitive tick-tock of "time time time time time" as cummings puts it in the poem quoted above.

Given all this, the metaphor of a journey in line 1 of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" gets turned on its head, for it is not possible to go on a journey to discover something that is already present here and now. This is why the spiritual journey is often described in Eastern mystical literature (the *Upanishads*, for example) as a pathless path; the only way it can be expressed is through paradox. Cummings suggested as much in another of his posthumously published poems, "seeker of truth":

seeker of truth
follow no path
all paths lead where
truth is here

The second phrase of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" implies another paradox in the same vein. What does it mean if something is "beyond any experience" and yet can be described as the silence discernible in the eyes of (it is to be assumed) the beloved? This is an experience that is paradoxically an un-experience, or

a nonexperience, which conveys the inadequacy of the usual categories in which perceptual experiences are described.

Another paradox occurs in line 4, following the mysterious "things" conveyed by the beloved's "frail gestures" which "enclose" the speaker but which he "cannot touch because they are too near." What does it mean to say that one cannot touch something because it is too near? It may suggest that an emotion or feeling opened up in the speaker by the transforming presence of the beloved is so intimate, so delicate and subtle, that he cannot lay hold of it; to touch it, to try to articulate it in words, would be to destroy it. The phrase also suggests something even deeper. To touch something implies a separation between the toucher and the object touched. If something is so near that it cannot be touched, there is no separation between the subject and the object. The phrase thus becomes an image of oneness, of absolute union between the speaker and some previously unknown, and precious, aspect of life.

Cummings enjoyed lacing his poems with paradoxes such as these, and there has been some complaint from critics that he overused the device. In the view of Carl Bode, writing in *Critical Essays on E. E. Cummings*, cummings's paradoxes, rather than enriching his poems, "created a barrier between cummings and his reader because of the way [they] defeated even the most assiduous attempts to make out the poem's meaning."

There may be some truth in this assertion, but the paradoxes in this poem seem clearly aimed at establishing a transcendental frame of reference with which to grasp the main thrust of meaning.

"[T]he power of your intense fragility" is almost exactly the same as the paradox "strong fragile" which cummings used in his early poem "my love is building a building," and which was one of the examples that aroused Bode's displeasure. It expresses at once strength and weakness, and yet it is not devoid of meaning. The transcendental context is clear: this "intense fragility" of the beloved is like nothing that can be encountered in the everyday world of experience. It is fragile because it is likely to break up at any moment, in the sense that it is constantly leading the lover on to something beyond his customary self. This is the experience of completely open awareness that is at the heart of the poem, and which is clearly evoked, again through paradox, in the fourth line of this stanza.

In that paradox, "death and forever," the speaker dies to all smallness, all limitations, all petty concerns of life and is reborn into "forever," a state of consciousness that is complete and eternal. As L. S. Dembo, in his essay, "E. E. Cummings: The Now Man," put it: "To die in time and be reborn in timelessness is the poetic aim of life." This paradox of dying into life is a common one in religious and mystical thought. It is found in this poem by Rumi for example (quoted in Harvey's *The Way of Passion*):

To die in life is to become life.
The wind stops skirting you

And enters; all the roses, suddenly,
Are blooming in your skull.

This is a particularly interesting example since the metaphor of the opening, rebirthing self as a flowering rose is also used by cummings in the poem under consideration: "you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skilfully, mysteriously)her first rose." Cummings returns to this metaphor in the final stanza, but in a clever twist he transcends it as he comes back for the third time in the poem to the image of the beloved's eyes: "the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses." In other words, the deepest truth leaves all images and metaphors behind. It is truly inexpressible, beyond the resources of language to capture. But it can be intuitively known, and its presence is always healing, even if the speaker has "closed [him]self as fingers." He would have agreed with Rumi's fellow Sufi poet Hafiz, quoted in *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, who in one poem to the divine wrote:

I have
Seen you heal
A hundred deep wounds with one glance
From your spectacular eyes.

This elucidation of the paradoxes of "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" does not absolve the poem of some of its weaknesses. Bode and others have accused cummings of indulging in "casually semi-private writing" which would be hard to explicate unless the poet himself decided to explain it. It is difficult, for example, to ascribe much meaning to "colour of its countries" in stanza 5, or to avoid the conclusion that the words were chosen largely because of their alliteration. And the final line, "nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands" also seems a very private one. One is reminded of a lecture given by the poet Robert Graves in 1955, in which he offered 1 pound in cash to any member of the audience who could make sense of one of Dylan Thomas's more obscure lines. (Thomas is a poet who resembles cummings at many points.) Of cummings's line, it might properly be asked, In what sense does rain have hands, whether small or not? Be that as it may, it would be churlish to end with harsh criticism of a poem that moves so tenderly, so mysteriously, and with such humility, into the realm of transcendental love and spiritual knowledge.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Heyen reacts to critical evaluations of Cummings by other critics and calls "somewhere i have never travelled . . . " "among the finest and most profound poems on the theme of love ever written."

E. E. Cummings' *100 Selected Poems* was published in 1959. This selection, which includes work from *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923) through *Xaipe* (1950), was made by Cummings himself. These were the poems, no doubt, that he considered his best and perhaps most representative. I'd like to talk about a few of the lyrics in this volume, and to move from them to critical considerations that they inevitably raise.

I am now three sentences deep into my talk and already almost forced to stop. For there is a sense in which, from Cummings' point of view, from the assumptions and visions of his life and life's work, poems *do not* inevitably raise critical considerations. Poems are poems, and they are to be taken for what they are or are to be left alone. And when mind starts tampering with them, Cummings would say, we'll have the same situation as occurs in one of his poems when the "doting / fingers of / prurient philosophers" poke and prod the earth to no avail. In the first of his *i: six nonlectures* (1953) Cummings quotes Rainer Maria Rilke:

"Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them." This is said so well and it sounds so good that it may be true, but I don't know just what "love" is; or, at least, I think that part of the love I bring to any poem is the result of something more than pure feeling. But this is to quarrel, of course, more with Cummings than with Rilke.

John Logan, an American poet who has written what is to my mind the single finest essay on Cummings, will allow me to get at least my hands unstuck from this tarbaby of a dilemma. In "The Organ-Grinder and the Cockatoo: An Introduction to E. E. Cummings" (*Modern American Poetry: Essays in Criticism,* ed. Jerome Mazzaro, 1970), Logan says that when Yvor Winters charged that Cummings "understands little about poetry," Winters missed the whole point. "It is not Cummings' job," says Logan, "to understand poetry; it's his job to write it; and it is up to the critics to understand and to derive whatever new machinery they need to talk about the poems. . . ." So, Logan will at least allow me to talk about the poet he believes to be "the most provocative, the most humane, the most inventive, the funniest, and the least understood" of his generation. I don't know whether I'm ready or ever will be to erect "new machinery," but at least I am not slapped in the face as I am by so many of Cummings' poems which accuse me of being a "most-people" with a 2 + 2 = 4 mentality should I ever attempt anything sensible or logical. For Cummings, of course, this irascibility in the face of criticism may be more of a mask than a true self. Certainly, one of his ploys is hyperbole. Richard Wilbur, in fact, tells a very winning story about visiting Cummings in Greenwich Village, about Cummings nonchalantly mentioning some sort of article on him by a fellow named Blackmur which he hadn't seen, and about seeing a whole stack of *Hound and Horn,* the magazine with Blackmur's essay, in a corner. Cummings

probably was more aware of criticism than he cared to admit. Although he was a loner, and although he persisted in his stylistic and thematic leaps and glides like a single salmon making its way upstream, many of his poems, like the one beginning "mr youse needn't be so spry / concernin questions arty," may be masks and defenses. In any case, I trust that Cummings' ghost wouldn't be offended by something a professor of mine used to say: "The major purpose of criticism is that sooner or later someone should say something."

When I think of Cummings, the first poem I think about is No. 28 from the selected volume. First collected in *is 5* (1926), it argues the mathematics of that title:

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

I am more than fond of this poem. I think it is imaginative and compelling, convincing and even deep. But what I have realized, and this is to strike to the center of the matter on my mind, is that it sometimes seems as though I could not possibly appreciate this poem or much of Cummings if I did not read it as though Cummings were masking himself in hyperbole, as though he deliberately or not established a persona and an emotional and mental world for his persona to inhabit. I want to read this poem as though it speaks better than its speaker knows. I want to say that its essential thrust is its duplicity. I want to say that Cummings does not go as far as many of his critics have said he has gone in denying rationality, intelligence, logic; that these abstractions are indeed his whipping boys, but in a more complex way than Cummings has been given credit for.

Certainly, any poem is a fiction; it is a poem's burden to convince us of the truth of what I. A. Richards called its "pseudo-statements." When Robert Frost says "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," his poem, to be successful, has to convince me, through its

images and sounds and languages, that there is indeed something in nature that wants walls down. Whether or not (and I suspect not) there *is* some natural force that detests walls is beside the point. The fiction has to be convincing, at least temporarily. Frost himself defined poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion." In "Directive" he tells us to follow him and to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." Poetry, to my mind, is a refuge from chaos; even when poems seek to embody chaos, they give shape to it. But while every poem is a fictional construct, the problem is that so many of Cummings' poems assume the same insistent hatred for rationality that they seem in the end to be speaking the poet's own narrow belief.

since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the
syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you. . . .

It is not true that feeling is always first. It seems to me that emotions often arise after thought. But Cummings' first line is the given of his poem, his speaker's assumption. It is very important, of course, that he convince his listener that he is right. For this is a seduction poem. He is telling his lady to make good use of time, to act from feeling, to abandon her "syntax" in the matters of, perhaps, time and the steps of proper courtship. Our Romeo has only words□I think of Ogden Nash's famous seduction poem: "Candy is dandy, / but liquor is quicker"□ and one of the delights for us in visualizing the dramatic situation of this poem is in anticipating whether or not our swain will be successful in petting or bedding his lady. This is a digression of sorts, but the poem can be read as a defense of spontaneous poetry, as a confrontation between poet and muse. What it should not be read as is a blanket condemnation of rationality. Mind was a villain for Cummings when it became dissociated from feeling, when it made bombs or political systems without regard to humane consequences.

Cummings' speaker in this poem finds perfect words and a wonderful sort of reasoning to convince his lady. He tells her that she will never really be kissed until she is kissed without forethought, that kisses are better than wisdom, that his brain's best gesture is nothing next to the flutter of her eyelids. Then he tells her that he knows, probably better than she does, just how she feels, that her eyes give her away. Then come the clinchers, the old visions of worms trying the chastity of virgins in their graves: "life's not a paragraph"□ i.e., it is not something formal and organized and part of a larger composition; it is all we have. "And death I think is no parenthesis"□he argues, at the same time, that death is not parenthetical, is not a bit of extra information. Death is the final arbiter of everything. As Cummings writes in another poem, doom "will smooth entirely our minds." What lady could resist the Gatsby-like plaintiveness of that last parenthetical statement uttered so offhandedly and matter-of-factly? What lady, in fact, could resist the inexorable logic of this poem?

What we have here, then, is a carefully contrived and logical lyric that argues feeling and the abandonment of inhibition to larger forces. What we have, also, is a conventional lyric, one reminiscent of seventeenth-century love songs or even of the songs of the medieval troubadors. I hear this conventional quality often in Cummings, in

a poem like "All in green went my love riding" (No. 2), for example, or in "if i have made, my lady, intricate" (No. 29).

But to return to what I see to be the central problem of any consideration of Cummings: "since feeling is first" is one of any number of Cummings' poems that seem to argue against any display of rationality, mentality, intelligence, thought; that is, against the processes of the upper mind. Cummings is often considered charming and primitive and shallow as a thinker. And worse: an antiintellectual. Norman Friedman, Cummings' first book-length critic, has said that many important critics□Edmund Wilson, Randall Jarrell, Louis Untermeyer, John Crowe Ransom, F. O. Matthiessen□have just not known what to make of Cummings. Roy Harvey Pearce in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961) calls Cummings "hyperconsciously lyrical" and is among those who have not been able to justify Cummings' typography. (James Dickey says he is not interested in this aspect of Cummings; Richard Wilbur sees Cummings' experiments as basically reductive, a sacrifice of the ear to the eye; Max Eastman forty years ago saw Cummings as a leading member of the "cult of unintelligibility," a poet who turned punctuation marks loose on a page like bacteria to eat the insides out of otherwise healthy words.) But the central problem in regard to Cummings is what seems to be his permanent adolescence in so stridently defending life against any intrusion by mind. Is it possible that Cummings really believes all of those escapist things he seems to be saying? Poem after poem tells us that we "shall above all things be glad and young" (No. 54), that "all ignorance toboggans into know / and trudges up to ignorance again" (No. 84), that "anything's righter / than books / could plan" (No. 88), that the supreme facts of existence are that scientists and thinkers are bad guys and that "girls with boys / to bed will go" (No. 47). Does he really believe, as he said in his introduction to new poems included in *Collected Poems* (1938), "Never the murdered finalities of wherewhen and yesno, impotent nongames of wrongright and rightwrong"? Is there as much pure and obstinate resolution in Cummings' universe as there seems to be? I don't think so. I think that just as Whitman declared himself to be a poet of body and soul but had to spend a greater amount of time on armpits and breasts because they had been neglected in poetry, Cummings has to emphasize feeling as opposed to thought. We had had enough thought in our poetry (indeed, in our whole society of passionless Cambridge ladies and politicians and scientists). And hyperbole on behalf of unimpeded emotion would help to balance the scales. Cummings relies on the shock value of unconventional statement presented no-holdsbarred. Cummings' speakers speak what they believe now, and in hard words, as Emerson said any real man must. If Cummings' persona in "since feeling is first" seems to argue that any sort of mentality is useless and stupid, the poet I hear behind the poem's pose means what Emerson meant when he said that "Thinking is a partial act" and that a "man thinking" instead of a "thinking man" knew and felt that he had to live each moment of life to its utmost or he would lose his soul. The Cummings I hear is a reformer nagging and pleading for and bragging about a radical resolution of sensibility so that, as Thoreau says in *Walden,* life would be "like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets." In his 1946 essay "Lower Case Cummings" William Carlos Williams said that Cummings is addressing his language "to the private conscience of each of us in turn." Should any great number of

us understand Cummings, said Williams, "the effect would be in effect a veritable revolution, shall we say, of morals? Of, do we dare to say, love?"

I would like at this point to quote from R. P. Blackmur, whose criticism of Cummings is archetypal:

> [In Cummings] there is no pretense at hardness of surface. We are admitted at once to the bare emotion. What is most striking, in every instance, about this emotion is the fact that, in so far as it exists at all, it is Mr. Cummings' emotion, so that our best knowledge of it must be, finally, our best guess. It is not an emotion resulting from the poem; it existed before the poem began and is a result of the poet's private life. Besides its inspiration, every element in the poem, and its final meaning as well, must be taken at face value or not at all. This is the extreme form, in poetry, of romantic egoism: whatever I experience is real and final, and whatever I say represents what I experience. Such a dogma is the natural counterpart of the denial of the intelligence.

Blackmur's chief complaint against Cummings is the deadness and personalism, though we may feel just the opposite, of Cummings' language, and even John Logan, chief among Cummings' admirers, admits that the older poet's vocabulary is "the least imaginative aspect of his work (coinages and composites aside.)" At the same time, Logan senses a great depth in many poems and tells us, in fact, that "Freud's analysis of the punnings, splittings, and composings in the language of dreams and jokes provides an insight into some of Cummings' effects, which to my knowledge no student has yet followed out."

What strikes me as off the track of Cummings in Blackmur is his insistence that a Cummings poem "must be taken at face value or not at all," that the emotion of a poem "is Mr. Cummings' emotion." I think that this is far from true, that seldom, if ever, is Cummings' language so flat or private that I am left with only an emotion of resolution, so to speak, one that existed before the poem. The question is, with so many of Cummings' poems: What is the relation between the sensibility of the poet and his speaker's sensibility? I don't think there are any simple answers to this. Each poem may be a case in itself. I think that "since feeling is first" ought to be read as a sort of inquiry, though this is too philosophical a word, into the tenability of the poem's fictions, and not as a statement of Cummings' belief in the good sense that spontaneous sex makes in the face of death, or as just another Cummings poem celebrating the poet's own epicureanism. Cummings was a craftsman he left behind, I read somewhere, 150 pages of drafts for a 50-line poem alone and his poems are artifacts that often unfold several levels of irony. Given Cummings' aesthetic, his sense of the poem as an object, his labor to promote nuance and suggestion, we owe it to him to read the poems very

carefully, masks and all, and not to throw them into one small basket labeled The Poet's Belief. Cummings was not, in general, a poet of the anticipated, stock emotion. Consider the depth of "if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have / one" (No. 31), a poem that sounds the losses of the heaven of love. And consider "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond / any experience" (No. 35). It seems to me that these two are among the finest and most profound poems on the theme of love ever written. At his best, Cummings is far from immature, and his mind is far from flimsy, whatever "since feeling is first" or similar poems initially suggest. Cleanth Brooks, in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), can say that Robert Frost's voice issues from a character who may be described as "the sensitive New Englander, possessed of a natural wisdom; dry and laconic when serious; genial and whimsical when not; a character who is uneasy with hyperbole and prefers to use understatement to risking possible overstatement." Brooks can go on to say, and I think with justification, that "The range of Frost's poetry is pretty thoroughly delimited by the potentialities for experience possessed by such a character." I do not think, though attempts have been made, that Cummings will be caught in this way. The Cummings voice behind even what might be called the childhood poems, "in Just- / spring" (No. 4) and "who knows if the moon's" (No. 13), for example, is elusive.

I have mentioned the duplicity of many of Cummings' poems, the depth, or the level of irony inherent in them. I have also urged a close reading. To talk about one of the two love poems mentioned earlier, poems of obvious complexity, would load the argument and involve a long discussion. Blackmur also objects to Cummings' "tough guy" poems (poems of Jazz effects, tough dialects, barkers, prostitutes, etc.) as being purely surface poems which leave us with "the certainty that there was nothing to penetrate." There is no question but that Blackmur is sometimes correct. Two of Cummings' tough guy elegies come to mind, "i sing of olaf glad and big" (No. 30), and "rain or hail" (No. 78). Neither poem gives us much more than a surface. Neither poem is likely to demand particularly close attention. Also, sometimes when Cummings is just a fraction away from reaching an important theme, from coming to grips with an important issue, he seems to shy away, content with humor when much more is within reach. "spoke joe to jack" (No. 56) is such a poem. What Cummings gives us is a graphic description of a barroom fight over a girl. The last two lines, "jesus what blood / darling i said" edge toward the very complicated relationships between violence and sex, but the poem's potential seems abandoned. Also, many of Cummings' satirical poems, such as "'next to of course god america i'" (No. 24), are watery and thin, eliciting only stock responses. But often Cummings' poems are deceptively simple and we discover that what at first seemed an objective and bare statement involves much more. This is the case, I believe, with "raise the shade" (No. 10).

raise the shade
will youse dearie?
rain
wouldn't that

get yer goat but
we don't care do

we dearie we should
worry about the rain

huh
dearie?
yknow
I'm

sorry for awl the
poor girls that
get up god
knows when every
day of their
lives
aint you,
oo-oo. dearie

not so
hard dear
you're killing me

If we leave this poem in its own comic world where it seems to stand□and it is, plain and downright, a funny poem□we'll miss its larger importance, its high seriousness, its subtle art that raises it to the first rank of Cummings' poems. Cummings' persona here, probably a mistress or a prostitute on an all-nighter or sleeping with her pimp, speaks much better than she knows, and the poem becomes a wide psychological portrait in a few words and a brilliant example of dramatic irony. Immediately her diction, "youse" and "dearie," gives her away as uneducated, so ignorant that any sort of conscious irony on her part is impossible. But if someone says to us "I'm not a liar, I'm not a liar, I'm not a liar," we know that that person is protesting too much, that he is revealing more than he knows about himself, that he probably is a liar. Listen to our heroine here: "we don't care do / we dearie we should / worry about the rain / huh / dearie?" Her rhetorical questions are dead givaways themselves, and Cummings stands behind her questions. Notice the ends of the lines: "we don't care do / we dearie we should . . . " And notice the end of the stanza: "worry about the rain . . . " She is lost, and knows it, even if this knowledge has not reached a conscious level. She also knows, or feels, that "god / knows when" other girls get up to work. She thinks of their routine as hard and dreary, but speaking in Cummings' chosen rhythms she reveals the monotony of her own affairs: "oooo. dearie / not so / hard dear . . . " In these terms, "you're killing me" becomes a deep statement, the poem's first line becomes a kind of prayer for any light on this waste land. But it is raining, of course, and her partner is not sufficiently interested in her slow death even to say one word.

G. S. Fraser, in a review of Cummings' *Poems: 1923-1954,* argued that what Cummings leaves out of his world is "the complex personal relationships of men and women. What Mr. Cummings seems to me to substitute for this fine traditional theme is, firstly, a

celebration of the sexual appetites and achievements of the hearty male animal: and, secondly, the celebration of a kind of mystical attitude toward life in general. . . ." Fraser goes on to say that Cummings' "love poetry is, in a bad sense, impersonal. . . ." In general, I don't think this is true. To Cummings love is a serious and complex matter, difficult to fathom, fraught with darkness as we are reminded in "my father moved through dooms of love" (No. 62). In a poem like "raise the shade," it is the realm of possible love beyond this almost tragic scene that serves as the poem's foil. There are love poems in the Cummings canon as deep as we are likely to find anywhere. Impersonal? Only in the sense that Whitman's poems are impersonal, bulwarked by the faith that if he can truly speak for himself he will be speaking for us all.

I'd like to turn now to something suggested by Fraser's statement that Cummings' poetry celebrates "a kind of mystical attitude toward life." Fraser, by the way, also charges Cummings with "a youthful, not very well-balanced religiousness, a 'reverence for life' combined with a youthful refusal to accept death as a fact." I must admit that this last statement especially puzzles me, since I could argue that all of Cummings begins with the blunt fact of death and attempts to build from there. In any case, this question of Cummings' religiousness, his "mystical attitude toward life," is one that should be examined.

The truth is that Cummings often seems awfully unfashionable. He celebrates and affirms. He cherishes "mystery," one of his very favorite words, and spring and flowers. He prays that his heart be always open to little things, and he gives thanks to God for the grace of each amazing day. He tells us in his *i: six nonlectures* that he loved his parents and that they loved him□how out of step with the times is this?□and tells us that he considers himself no worthy specimen of the socalled lost generation. He insists on individuality. Rather than puzzle over good and evil, he seems to assume that we all know, if we allow our feelings full play, what is right and what is wrong. While Wallace Stevens could say that we need our minds to defend us, Cummings often seems to trust the beneficence of pure emotional Being. "Life, for eternal us, is now; and now," as he says in the introduction to his collected *Poems: 1923-1954,* "is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything, catastrophic included. . . ." It is difficult to know what to make of Cummings. Or is it? You know that old adage: if it has feathers like a duck and waddles like a duck and sounds like a duck and eats what a duck eats, it may very well be a duck. Cummings is a Transcendentalist. In *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (1968) Hyatt H. Waggoner argues, and to my mind absolutely convincingly, that Cummings' "poetry and prose give us the purest example of undiluted Emersonianism our century has yet provided." We have been slow to recognize this, and I'm not sure why. Perhaps we did not want to equate a writer as seemingly modern as Cummings, with all of his dazzle and virtuosity, with those nineteenth-century sages from Concord. But Cummings is a Transcendentalist, and to call him this, of course, is still not to button-hole him comfortably. He will elude all but general definition, as Whitman claimed to. He will never, as J. Alfred Prufrock, that most nontranscendental of all men, was, be pinned to a lepidopterist's wall.

I will not attempt to summarize the parallels Professor Waggoner draws between Cummings and Emersonian tradition. The point is that given his transcendental

assumptions Thoreau, for example, and everything he says in *Walden* and elsewhere is absolutely unassailable. Criticism is beside the point. To complain that Cummings' pacifism, for example, is "not argued out," as Fraser complains, is beside the point. To talk about a "philosophy" or system of thought in regard to a poet who refuses all but illimitable Being is beside the point. Cummings has been speaking a different language from the one so many of his critics have been wanting to yoke him with. We cannot charge a Transcendentalist with unearned joy or sudden irrationality any more than we can charge a mystic. Cummings' transcendentalism explains his poems' tendencies to see society as being in conspiracy against its members, their celebrations of youth and the noble savage like Olaf who only knows that there are some things he will not eat. Cummings' transcendentalism explains his unconcern for consistency, his glorification of intuition, his optimism, even the undercurrent of satirical instruction as in "When serpents bargain for the right to squirm" (No. 89) and "Humanity i love you" (No. 16), poems whose life is rooted in the same love-hate for man and the same desire to lead the townspeople to freedom and happiness that generated *Walden.* Cummings' transcendentalism explains his "not very well-balanced religiousness." If we make the faithful leap and read Cummings in the spirit with which we read an essay by Emerson or Whitman's "Song of Myself," we will find that most of the critical objections seem to melt away. If we do not for any reason see fit to do this, his achievement often seems very thin indeed.

I see that I have made a sort of transcendentalist's circle, one that comes back to where it started but one that may not be entirely round. "Works of art"□this is Cummings quoting Rilke, as you'll recall□"are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them." Cummings tilled the soil, as Emerson said every man must, that was given to him to till. To Cummings any poem and the life force that the poem manifested was an ecstasy and an intuition, not an induction. We cannot in any logical way argue with the transcendental assumptions that make Cummings' world what it is and his poems what they are. All we can do is to make a Cummings poem our own, to appreciate its crafts and mysteries as best we can and to come to love it, or we can reject it. His poem No. 96 begins "the great advantage of being alive / (instead of undying) is not so much / that mind no more can disprove than prove / what heart may feel and soul may touch," and ends:

a billion brains may coax undeath
from fancied fact and spaceful time□
no heart can leap, no soul can breathe
but by the sizeless truth of a dream
whose sleep is the sky and the earth and the sea.
For love are in you am in i are in we

Source: William Heyen, "In Consideration of Cummings," in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring 1973, pp. 131-42.

Adaptations

E. E. Cummings: A Poetry Collection is an audiocassette that gathers selections from the poet's work. Published in 2001, the collection features poems read by cummings. It is available from HarperAudio.

The *Great Voices Audio Collection* (1994) is an audiocassette that gathers selections from four writers: Ernest Hemingway, Anais Nin, James Joyce, and cummings. Each writer reads his or her own work. In the case of cummings, the poet reads from his *XAIPE* collection. The audiobook is available from HarperAudio.

Topics for Further Study

Some commentators have called cummings a unique poet. Read through several other avantgarde or experimental poetry by different poets and try to find a poem that is similar to the entry poem. Compare the two poems in terms of punctuation, grammar, and style.

Read more about cummings's life and write a short biography about the woman who you think is the subject of the poem.

Cummings wrote this poem during the era known as the Great Depression in the United States. Compare cummings's poetry during this time period with other depression-era poetry. Discuss any trends that you find in this poetry.

In the poem, the poet is amazed at how his lover has been able to change his perspective about life. Research the physiology and psychology of love and discuss why you think love has this effect. Use your research to support your claims.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1920s-Early 1930s: The world escalates toward a world war, in large part due to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. **Today:** The world is engaged in a war on terrorism, in large part focusing on Middle Eastern figureheads such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Late 1920s-Early 1930s: During the Great Depression, most Americans focus on the struggle to survive and feed their families, so there is little time for quiet reflection about love and other feelings.

Today: Despite a massive recession that leaves many Americans jobless, people take time out to appreciate love and other feelings. In fact, although some men still fit the stereotype of being a tough-guy male who bottles up his feelings, the self-help revolution of the late twentieth century has encouraged everybody, men included, to get in touch with their feelings.

Late 1920s-Early 1930s: Americans are encouraged to be conservative with their sexuality. **Today:** Despite the very real threat of lethal venereal diseases like AIDS, it is a very sexually free time. Sensual images and words can be found in most major media, including television, radio, and print ads.

What Do I Read Next?

In the decade before cummings wrote "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond," another avant-garde artistic movement, surrealism, gained force. *Surrealist Painters and Poets* (2001), edited by Mary Ann Caws, offers a good introduction to the works of surrealist painters and poets from this era, including some rare letters and essays that are hard to find elsewhere.

Although cummings is best known for his poetry, he also wrote other works, including *Eimi* (1933), a travel diary of his trip to the Soviet Union in 1931. Up until that point, cummings had been a supporter of communism but changed his views after witnessing the Soviet dictatorship that masqueraded as a communist government. The book is a scathing review of the Soviet Union and its policies.

Cummings's eccentric, experimental style was evident in his first poetry collection, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923). While the initial reviews of the collection were mixed, many recognized cummings's poetic talent even at this early stage in his career.

The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry (1999), edited by Alan Kaufman and S. A. Griffin, is a wide-ranging anthology of avant-garde and experimental American poetry from the 1950s to today. Selections include works from more than two hundred poets.

Further Study

Friedman, Norman, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1972.

Friedman, a noted cummings scholar, offers a selection of critical essays that examines several aspects of cummings's work.

Kennedy, David M., *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, Oxford History of the United States series, No. 9, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Kennedy, a Stanford history professor, chronicles the years during the Great Depression and Second World War, at times posing theses that directly contradict established views. This accessible, comprehensive study relies on an extensive number of both published accounts and primary sources to recreate this formative period in America's history.

Kennedy, Richard S., *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*, Liveright, 1980.

Kennedy's critical biography is noted for its insights into cummings's life. The comprehensive biography also includes drawings by cummings, comments from his daughter, and some previously unpublished poems.

Marks, Barry, *E. E. Cummings*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 46, Twayne, 1963.

Published shortly after cummings's death, this book gives a biographical and critical overview of the author's life and work.

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BOOKRAGS

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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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