

## INTRODUCTION



e. e. cummings

(1894-1962)

Edward Estlin Cummings at a glance is the most radical innovator of all the Modernists, due to the look of his poems on a page. His words and punctuations and other marks appear to have spilled out of a toy box. At first they seem to be nonsense, like the experimental prose of Gertrude Stein, a clear influence on cummings. Yet the more you consider his poems, the more implications you discover, though often much remains obscure. He was a painter all his life and saw his poems in spatial terms of graphic art. He is the most Expressionistic of major American poets, as Faulkner is the most Expressionistic of major novelists. No poet is more inventive, ironic and clever, yet childlike. At his best, as a Modernist he achieves a perfect synergy of form and content, but when sensibility obscures sense, when style and technique become more significant than content, when they *become* the content, his poems become Postmodern.

While he is known for being flamboyantly original in form and technique, cummings also wrote sonnets and is traditional in content. He is a pastoral Romantic—“since feeling is first”—among the many followers of Whitman, a vague transcendentalist with themes such as “seize the day” that are centuries old. Even much of his satire became conventional after American popular culture swung left in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. His attacks on boobs and Babbitts, on puritanism, commercialism, philistinism, and materialism—as in “Beauty hurts Mr. Vinal”—lost their original force through repetition in the tidal wave of countercultural social protest that swept through the country for the rest of the century. More than any other American writer up to his time, when he was young cummings was a prototype of the hippie, who would have fit right in at the Woodstock Festival of 1969. He also believed in flying saucers and he prayed to God all his life. He often wrote his name without any capital letters to level himself modestly from the shriek of E. E. and sometimes used i rather than I.

The common reader may be put off by most of his 2,900 poems because of how they look and the way they scramble language. You need to feel they are worth analyzing. But any reader should be able to appreciate the novelty and spirit of short poems such as his “Portrait” of Buffalo Bill, the wordrushing passion of his love poems, and a little masterpiece such as “Chanson Innocent,” remarkable for combining simplicity, economy, thematic complexity, archetypal depth, and comprehensive vision.

## BIOGRAPHY

E. E. Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1894 at the end of the Victorian era, the son of a minister and professor at Harvard. He rebelled against his father's conventional way of life, his puritanism, his piety, and his parishioners—"the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls / are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds." Young cummings rebelled like the Maypolers did against the Puritans centuries before. He adopted the posture of a bohemian poet. He read the new poets—Pound and H. D. and Sandburg and Amy Lowell—and he started writing free verse according to Imagist principles. His mother encouraged his writing and he remained devoted to her all his life.

In his poetry writing class at Harvard he made the professor uncomfortable with his experiments using irregular meters and line lengths, and with his vulgar diction and unconventional subject matter. He responded to these qualms with a poem in heroic couplets about drunken brawling and prostitutes in a beer hall, including the words "bitch" and "whore." He graduated from Harvard in 1915 and remained the next year to earn an M.A. in literature. At his graduation ceremony, honored as one of the commencement speakers, he defied the prevailing taste of his classmates and professors—"mostpeople"—by praising cubist painting and the music of Stravinsky. He was developing his own personal style of poetry, called by one critic "literary cubism." Over in Paris, the art patron Gertrude Stein had already begun developing her own version of literary Expressionism, as in her prose poem "Picasso" (1909).

## WORLD WAR I

In 1917, responding to World War I, cummings and his college friend John Dos Passos along with thousands of other young Americans, volunteered their services. Cummings drove an ambulance for the Red Cross in France while Ernest Hemingway drove an ambulance for the Red Cross on the front in Italy. His unconventional writing style in letters, his expressions of anti-war pacifism and his failure to hate the Germans prompted the suspicions of government censors that cummings was a spy. He got detained for over 3 months in a French internment camp. His father campaigned for his release and President Woodrow Wilson finally arranged for cummings to be set free. He rendered his experiences as a prisoner in *The Enormous Room* (1922), a work of creative non-fiction that first made him famous. A publisher's note to the Modern Library edition described him as "the terror of typesetters, an enigma to book reviewers, and the special target of all the world's literary philistines." The book was admired as a Modernist masterpiece during the 1920s, notably by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but it got eclipsed by Kafka and by the greater horrors of incarceration perpetrated later by the Nazis and the Communists.

## MODERNISM

The pacifist cummings was forgiving. He stayed in France and lived there from 1921 to 1923, participating in the bohemian culture of the Left Bank in Paris, where he was influenced by Guillaume Apollinaire, Stephane Mallarme and Gertrude Stein. When U.S. President Warren G. Harding died, having amused literate people by boasting that he was a great writer, cummings observed that "The only person who ever committed six errors in one sentence has passed away." In 1923, the year before Ezra Pound moved to Italy, cummings moved to Greenwich Village in New York, where he spent the rest of his life writing and painting. From 1924 to 1927 he worked as an essayist and portrait artist for *Vanity Fair*. He spent his summers in rural New Hampshire, at Joy Farm in Silver Lake. His mother helped to support him. One of his neighbors in New York was the recluse Djuna Barnes. Now and then he called out to Djuna from his window, "*Hey, Djuna! Are you still alive?*"

## LOVE AND POLITICS

The love poet married twice and then had a lasting common-law marriage with a fashion model and photographer. His first wife left him for a rich banker and had a daughter she concealed from him because she wanted the child to believe her current husband was the father, then refused to honor his custody rights. In 1926 he was deeply affected when his father got killed by a train that crushed his car and almost killed his mother. The experience turned him into a more serious person.

He made a trip to the Soviet Union in 1931 and wrote an indictment of the Communist system, *Eimi* (1935) expressing a hatred of Stalin. After that, against a rising tide of Marxist sentiment during the Great Depression of the 1930s, especially in New York and Hollywood, Cummings became conservative. By 1935 he was politically incorrect to the Left and had to self-publish a book of poetry. He dedicated the book, entitled *No Thanks*, to the 14 publishers that had rejected it--by name--including Knopf, Random House, Viking, Harcourt, Dutton, Harper's, Scribner's, Farrar & Rinehart, Simon & Schuster, etc. He became a Republican like Gertrude Stein and during the 1950s was an ardent supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy in his exposure of Communist spies hired by liberals in the U.S. government.

#### DEATH

Cummings continued to paint and to write in several genres, including an introduction to a collection of the comic strip *Krazy Kat*. On a hot summer day up in New Hampshire, he was chopping wood. His wife came outside and told him he should quit. It was too hot. He answered with his last words, "I'm going to stop now, but I'm going to sharpen the axe before I put it up, dear."

Michael Hollister (2015)

